

Avoiding Meaningless Dialogue

By [Joshua M. Z. Stanton](#)

The nightmare scenario in inter-religious dialogue rarely involves open hostilities anymore, at least in the United States. This is a mark of progress. People who participate in dialogue genuinely want to interact with practitioners of other traditions – or at least learn something new. These days, dialogue at its worst is limited to platitudes and generalities about religious traditions: “Christians and Muslims both love peace. Why can’t we all just get along?”

The essential goal must be to raise the quality of dialogue and broach the difficult topics that preclude truly positive interactions, without provoking heated and counterproductive discussions. The question in people’s minds when they engage in dialogue may actually be: “Christians and Muslims both love peace and yet there is conflict between practitioners of each tradition in Nigeria. How can we collaborate to reduce tensions between our communities overseas?” Yet the message can get garbled in the heat of the moment, as people are trying so hard to please each other that they end up underwhelming everyone. Hence the platitudes.

Several major responses to sub-par dialogue have emerged, each with the goal of producing more meaningful inter-religious interchanges. Broadly speaking, these varying strategies may be categorized as cooperative, coupled, and intellectual.

Dr. Eboo Patel, Executive Director of the Interfaith Youth Core, author, and prolific writer, may be largely credited with inventing and popularizing cooperative dialogue. His central thesis is that young people would rather not sit around and talk. They want to change the world by doing. Getting a group of religiously diverse young (or older) people together to build a house or clean a park will provoke spontaneous dialogue and be more effective in improving inter-religious relations than any formal dialogue setting. Conversations about religion take place one-on-one and often provide a way to ask questions that might be considered inappropriate or offensive in a large group. Cooperative dialogue strategies have been implemented around the world and appear to be gaining momentum, as people of all ages may prefer to learn about each other through concrete actions that benefit people of all traditions.

Coupled dialogue similarly emphasizes action, at least in name, as the ultimate goal. However, it uses dialogue as a tool to guide and enable joint action. Coupled dialogue is frequently found in areas plagued by religious or ethnic conflict. The Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel and Auburn Theological Seminary, for example, run the Face to Face/Faith to Faith program for Israeli and Palestinian youth in Jerusalem. The trauma of day-to-day events in the region can be so intense that carefully facilitated dialogue is often a prerequisite for joint service projects of any kind. Community service in turn provides tangible proof that people of different backgrounds can work together towards a shared goal – even in the midst of the broader conflict. However, dialogue provides the essential starting point for productive interchanges.

The third kind of dialogue is substantively different from the other two in both its aims and methodology. The goal of intellectual dialogue is to better understand the dynamics taking place between religious communities, in all of their complexities. It frequently involves case studies – such as that of Muslims and Christians in Nigeria – and analyzes them from multiple perspectives. What religious texts are used to justify violence or promote peace? Is there an element of ethnic tension (or camaraderie) that the religious tensions are masking? What kinds of religious leaders tend to become peacemakers, and which tend to become warmongers? More often than not, such dialogue does not even take place in person, but on paper, at conferences, and in presentations. Many practitioners of intellectual dialogue are scholars, and many more still are aspiring scholars.

Ultimately, however, the greatest potential for progress through dialogue comes through the use of all three responses in accord with the particular scenario to which they are applied. Without a strong intellectual basis, dialogue between specific communities can lack the nuance necessary to broach more difficult – and fruitful – topics. In a sense, intellectual dialogue provides the context for both coupled and cooperative dialogue, as ideas from academia are adopted and adapted for widespread use. Such theory may help inter-religious leaders decide when to apply a strategy of cooperative dialogue and when a situation is so tense that coupled dialogue may in fact be preferable. Do participants need to talk to each other in order to work together at all? Ironically, it may be that each response to inane dialogue could be more effectively applied if discussed between scholars on the one hand and non-profit, civic, and religious leaders on the other. The varied responses to meaningless interchanges are themselves topics worth dialoguing about.

[Joshua M. Z. Stanton](#) is co-Editor of the [Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue](#)TM and a rabbinical student at [Hebrew Union College](#).