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The Age of Dialogue Begins at Home

Marchiene Rienstra

Grand Valley State University

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I believe Dr. Swidler is absolutely right when he says that the future offers two alternatives, death or dialogue, and that we are now poised at the entrance to the Age of Dialogue.

The first point I would like to make in my response is to suggest that our entrance into that age, in a way that will lead to life, must begin, and continue, at the most basic level of all—that of true dialogue between men and women, male and female, in every area of life.

I say this because the history of human culture, thus far, has been the record, by and large, of men talking of their own cultural selves, their own achievements, their own questions and struggles, their own victories and hopes, their own beliefs. Women have been the "other," almost invisible, subsumed under the male species as if to be human was to be male. Descriptions of women in history, art, psychology, religion, sociology, etc. have hardly ever come from "the other," that is, from women themselves, but have been the projections of males upon women.

One telling example of this, carefully researched, is in Carol Gilligan’s book, In A Different Voice. Gilligan describes her discovery that Kohlberg, in his well-known research on human moral development at Harvard University, used only men to draw his conclusions! Dr. Gilligan, and many others since, have found that there are significant differences between men and women in this and many other arenas. These differences have been largely ignored, or misrepresented and misused through the ages by men.

Of course, what Dr. Swidler calls the self-centered, monologic mindset is not, in the case of the relation between men and women, caused by isolation, for men have always lived with women closely. Yet how often they have, to a lesser or greater degree, failed to really listen to them, failed to respect them in their ownness, and indeed, often enough feared and resented them to the extent that we have an English word describing a widespread syndrome: misogyny. (There is no parallel word to describe any similar attitude of women toward men.)

It seems to me that the real root of the monologic mindset which Dr. Swidler urges us to all abandon is the self-centered pride which sees the "other" as inferior. This begins in the closest of all relations—that between men and women. The habit of thinking of the "other," i.e. of women, as inferior and frustrating (remember the line from a song in My Fair Lady, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?") simply expands to all those who are also regarded as "other." The Greeks called others "bar-
barians," Jews called others "Gentiles," and Christians called others "pagans." Of course, none of these were compliments. Habits of mind formed in childhood and in the home stick with one throughout life. That is why it seems clear to me that the Age of Monologue can only give way to the Age of Dialogue when men learn to hear, accept, and respect women. Only then can there be the widespread and basic shift out of the self-centered monologic mind-set to the relational dialogic mind-set which I believe, with Dr. Swidler, is essential to the survival of the human race. To put it positively and hopefully, I believe that when there is widespread genuine mutuality and relationality in which women's views and ways of being have equal weight with those of men in every area of life, then the shift to a dialogic mind-set will have taken place, and will make possible the inter-religious/inter-ideological dialogue which is the subject of this conference.

The second point in my response is to acknowledge the truth and value of Dr. Swidler's description of the huge paradigm shift that has happened with respect to how we humans know anything. It is indeed true that we now understand all statements about reality, especially about the meaning of things, are in some fundamental way, related to the speaker or knower. All truth is conditioned by the writer's or speaker's historical situation, intention, culture, class, gender—in short, by his or her standpoint.

This is related directly to my first point. Feminist scholars in many of the world's major religions are writing books describing the ways in which each religion and ideology has been profoundly and thoroughly shaped by masculine assumptions—ignoring other questions, other struggles, even quite different viewpoints—arising from a female point of view. For example, since men wrote most of the sacred texts of the great religions, it is not surprising that the prevailing language and metaphors for the Divine are masculine. Often, the metaphors for the spiritual life also come from the battlefield. Women, naturally, find the feminine metaphors for the Divine and for the spiritual life are important as a balance, and empower them in a vital way.

Further, women scholars of sacred texts are very much aware of how all knowledge of a text is interpretation of the text. Naturally, thus far in history, most of the knowledge and interpretation has been from the masculine point of view. Many aspects of sacred texts have been ignored, or even interpreted against women. Of course, I am most familiar with how this has happened with respect to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Women from other religious traditions will have their own examples.

The implication of all this seems to me to be that as men (who are currently in the vast majority as leader) proceed with inter-faith dialogue, they need constantly to examine how their masculine perspective has conditioned their faith, their presuppositions, and their practice. They need to listen to women who are discerning the different perspective of the feminine, and let this complement their own views, so that the exchange that takes place in inter-faith dialogue will not be based, as it so-of-
Of all the things that the assumptions and mind-sets of men have to change in order to learn to understand women, the most basic and fundamental is the mind-set that all women are subservient to men. To begin with, when genuine dialogue is sought out, it should not be assumed that equal participation is limited to men. Men and women should both have the right to define themselves, as Dr. Swidler insists. The world's religions use metaphors and language that empower men, but also those for women, so that all faith-traditions are affected by these inequalities. It would be too easy to assume that all faith-traditions, or any other aspect of human experience, are free of this kind of assumption. If this is true, then we are led to ask, what do we mean by genuine dialogue? Is it, for instance, the kind of dialogue that is represented in the faith-traditions or ideologies that they represent in dialogue. After all, as the famous Chinese proverb puts it, "Women hold up half the sky!" Therefore, when men seek out, in genuine dialogue with thoughtful women, how women perceive themselves, their faith-tradition, critical issues, and the like, and invite women to join them as leaders in the dialogue between faiths and ideologies—then we will truly proceed from being merely poised upon the threshold, to entering truly into the Age of Dialogue.

This brings me to the third point I would like to make in my response. The excellent ground rules for genuine dialogue which Dr. Swidler proposes have specific application to the foundation dialogue between men and women which I am advocating.

First, Dr. Swidler says that there must be internal dialogue between people within each faith-tradition, as well as between them. Those who seriously engage in dialogue with persons of other faiths or ideologies need also to be talking to those who share their faith or ideology. Right now, men especially need to talk to women in their faith-communities, because at this point in time few women are among those chosen as leading representatives of their faiths at the so-called "top levels" of officially sanctioned dialogue.

As men do this, the second ground rule comes into play—that the basic purpose is to learn, not teach, and be willing to change and grow in response to the other's viewpoint. This will be rather difficult for many at first, because on the whole, men have usually been in the role of teachers, and women of learners who must accept their teaching. But genuine dialogue demands that both sides learn from the other, and neither demands that the other simply agree.

A third ground rule is that participants must be allowed to define themselves. And just as a Christian must not define in dialogue what a Jew is, for instance, so too, men must not define for women what they are, what their role and function and place is, how they must practice their religion, etc. That is for women to discover and define.

A fourth ground rule is that there be no hard-and-fast assumptions made about the "other" in the dialogue believes, thinks, or does. This too, is a valuable rule for male-female dialogue, since both sides are afflicted with stereotypes (another name for hard-and-fast-assumptions) about the other, just as people of different religions are.

A fifth ground rule is that genuine dialogue can only take place between genuine equals. If one party has any sort of superiority complex, dialogue dies. Obviously, this means that men must relate to women as genuine equals in dialogue, not assuming that they do not think as well, for example; or demanding that they function like "junior men" in order to be accepted. This, in turn, is what makes possible the mutual trust that Dr. Swidler says is essential to dialogue.

A sixth ground rule is that all parties in dialogue need to be willing to be self-critical. No one assumes that his or her views or understanding are without error or pos-
sibility of improvement or expansion or even correction. In their dialogue, men and women need to realize that both masculine and feminine viewpoints are limited and need to expand and improve, with the help of the other.

A seventh ground rule is that members in dialogue with each other try to experience the partner's religion and view from within—that is to say, doing everything possible to have an open mind, heart, spirit, and to enter into and identify with the other person's way of believing. As men try to experience a woman's beliefs and way of being, to see "from within" in this way—and vice versa—there will be a marvelous expansion of understanding which will greatly enrich any dialogue between people of various faiths and ideologies.

Finally, Dr. Swidler points out that in the process of dialogue, the first thing that needs to happen is that we unlearn misconceptions and misinformation about the other. Then we can see clearly to discern the values in the other's way of seeing and doing, and even appropriate them into our own. How true this is also of the dialogue needed between men and women—not to mention any human relationship. Misunderstanding is probably part of your and my view of almost every person we know, at least to some extent. It is certainly part of the way men and women see each other. In my experience and reading, many, many women experience themselves as misunderstood and de-valued by men who do not seem to value the feminine way of seeing and being, or to value it only in a domestic context, and not in other areas of life. Perhaps men have the same experience—but I would not presume to speak for them.

In any case, it does seem clear to me that as men engage women in dialogue of the sort described by Dr. Swidler, there will be marvelous new areas of "revelation," as he calls it, which will open up for them, and in turn, will enable and enrich the dialogue between people of various faiths and ideologies which our world so desperately needs today.