



The *Insight* Interview Leonard Swidler

INTERVIEWER: ALAN RACE

This new section of the journal opens with an interview with one of the world's most articulate and energetic advocates of interreligious dialogue. Professor Leonard Swidler has organized dialogues especially between Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars from around the world since the 1970s. He is the author of many books and many have valued his advice and inspiring leadership. Professor Leonard Swidler is Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, Philadelphia, USA. The interview was conducted by Rev. Alan Race, Editor-in-Chief of Interreligious Insight.

Alan:

You have been involved in dialogue for over 40 years - what inspired you to get involved in the first place?

Len:

I am the son of parents who were like the subject of a 1930s radio program coming out of New York called "Abie's Irish Rose", which was a comedy about the encounter of a Jewish family (Abie's) and an Irish Catholic family (Rosie's, Abie's Irish Rose). My mother, Josephine Duffy Reed, whose Catholic ancestors came to America in the late 19th century from Ireland, married my father, Samuel Swidler, who himself as a 15-year old Jewish boy came all alone to America from the Ukraine in 1912. In my case, however, there was no Jewish family, for although my father regularly received mail from his mother, the letters suddenly stopped in 1932, the year that Stalin unleashed the brutal collectivization of the farms in the Ukraine, resulting in the murder of some five million Ukrainians.

I was raised as a devout Catholic, attending Catholic primary school, secondary school, college, university, and seminary (but not ordination). It was only as I studied for my Ph.D. in Philosophy and History at the University of Wisconsin that I moved into "secular" education. It was in 1956 when I was looking for a doctoral dissertation topic in the field of European intellectual History that I came across a contemporary movement of dialogue between Protestants and Catholics in Germany – the land of the Reformation – the *Una Sancta* Movement. Research on it led me

and my wife Arlene Anderson Swidler to Germany in 1957 – newly married that May 11. After returning to America in 1960, it was her brilliant idea to launch the first scholarly journal devoted to intra-Christian, and then quickly inter-religious, interideological dialogue, the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.

Alan:

Can you tell me what has given you most joy as a theologian about this involvement, and what remains disappointing?

Len:

I have to say that living through the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was, except for the present, the most exciting period of my life. As I indicated, I had been most thoroughly educated in the Catholic intellectual tradition. Hence, the extraordinary “five-fold Copernican turns” that I and fellow Catholics experienced with Vatican II was incredibly stimulating and liberating. There was 1) the turn toward freedom, epitomized by the Council’s *Decree on Religious Liberty*; 2) the turn toward this world, which unleashed Liberation Theologies; 3) the turn toward a sense of history, which lifted up change at the heart of all things human; 4) the turn toward the self-reform of the Catholic Church, with Saint John XXIII leading the way by “throwing open the windows of the Vatican”; and 5) the turn toward *Dialogue* with other Christians, other religions, other ideologies, which became the focus of the rest of my life.

The greatest disappointment has been, first the weakening of Pope Paul VI in his commitment to the great renewal

of Vatican II, and then vastly worse, the massive authoritarian roll-back by his successor Pope John Paul II. To the Jews and much of the rest of the outside world, he was a hero who stood up for human rights, but inside the Catholic Church he was hyper-authoritarian, who in a tragically long-lasting move over his twenty-seven year pontificate appointed almost all the current bishops of the world largely as loyal duplicates. I believe that is why the latest Pew survey shows that there are 65 million Catholics in the U.S., and 30 million *former* Catholics!

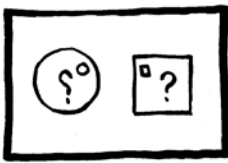
Alan:

You once said that dialogue represents a “whole new way of thinking” – can you say what you mean by that?

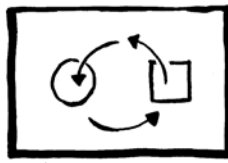
Len:

Until the period of modernity, starting with the 18th century Enlightenment in the West, the world in general lived in an *Age of Monologue*, meaning that we all talked only with those who thought as we did – or who should! Starting with the late 18th century and on into the 19th and 20th centuries, we underwent a radical shift in understanding how we humans understand, our epistemology. We increasingly began to realize that truth was not something absolute.

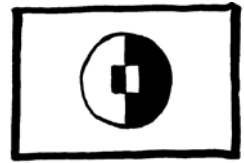
Since we normally use the word “true” to refer to our *statements* about some aspect of reality, we began to see, for example, with the development in the early 19th century of “scientific” history that a statement, a text, can only be correctly understood within its *con-text*. Hence, that text, that “truth”, is limited, not absolute (remember, the word *ab-solute*, coming from the Latin *ab-solvere*



Encounter



Dialogue



Respect

literally means un-limited). Then we went on to learn that some of our claims about reality, our “truths”, were at times significantly affected by our economic status, and then also by our social place in the world, and later even by the fact that we are asking questions sometimes in historical thought categories, in legal categories, in symbolic categories, etc. – all of which means that our statements about reality, our truths, can always only be partial. Not false, but necessarily partial, and related to our place in the world, to the kind of language we use, to the presuppositions we all bring to our view and description of reality, etc., etc.

In the end, then we can never fully see and describe reality, even though the part we see may be accurately enough described. But we humans are never satisfied with what we now know. We always want to know more and more, endlessly. However, when we understand that my partial grasp of reality is my grasp, not yours, and even when accurate, is always partial, the only way that I can constantly know more is by being in constant *dialogue* with those who think differently from me. Now I want to talk to those who think differently not so they can begin to think as I do, but so I can learn from them about reality that I cannot learn from my perspective alone. Thus dialogue is a whole new way to endlessly learn more about reality.

Editor:

Some Christians think that dialogue represents some sort of betrayal of Christian faith. How do you respond to that accusation?

Len:

There are many dimensions to this question, so let me reflect just a bit about one aspect. I start with empirical data: that of all the persons I know who have been seriously involved in interreligious dialogue, less than a fraction of 1% have as a result ceased being Christian, Jewish, Muslim.... So, as far as the religious institutions are concerned, the churches, mosques, synagogues, temples.... relax, you are not going to lose out quantitatively. In fact, you will gain massively qualitatively, for your adherents will become much deeper, more authentic Christians, Hindus, Muslims.... than they were before. I have been engaging in intra-Christian, interreligious, interideological dialogue for over half a century, and I am convinced today in 2008 that I have a deeper grasp on what it means to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth than I did forty or fifty years ago, or indeed, three months ago before I engaged in my last Jewish-Christian-Muslim Triologue in Amman, Jordan.

Editor:

The religions have the reputation for inspiring violence in the world – do you think this is true?

Len:

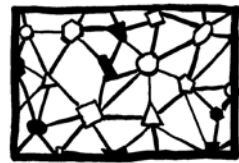
Sadly the facts bear this perception out! Think of the places where there has been horrible communal violence in recent years, and in almost all, if not all, religion plays a central role – Northern Ireland, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Afghanistan, Macedonia,



Engagement



Mutual Irradiation



Pluralism

Bosnia.... Why is this? It goes back to what I was speaking about when talking about dialogue, about our epistemology, our understanding of how we understand. All the major religions of the world developed before modernity. They were created in the mentality of Absolutism:

We have the only absolute, unlimited grasp of reality. If you do not follow our way, you are lost. Hence, we will save you, whether you ask us to or not, by making you into our image – or, you are obviously not worthy of salvation, and so we can destroy you.

Put in other words, much of the world still lives in the Age of Absolutism, the Age of Monologue. The encouraging news is that now the world is painfully, with squinting eyes stumbling out of that darkness into the dawn of the *Age of Global Dialogue*.

Editor:

A common view among ordinary people outside of the church is that the many religions are simply different routes up the one mountain. Is this a good picture for the dialogue movement?

Len:

Of course this is a better image to have than the old too often destructive absolutist one that I just spoke about. It portrays the impression that God or the Ultimate

is really out there, like the mountain, and that we humans are simply taking different paths on different sides of the mountain, all aiming to arrive at its pinnacle, which we know is there, though we cannot see it, for it is wrapped in clouds. Unfortunately this metaphor is not the most helpful, as neither Buddhists nor Taoists, for example, have the same kind of notion of the Ultimate or God “out there” as many theists do.

Rather, what we have in common is our *searching*. In fact, our Christianized English language gives us broad hints in this regard. In English we say that we are seeking salvation, which comes from the Latin *salus*, meaning health, wholeness, as in terms like salutary, salute, salubrious. We also find it in our Germanic rooted cognates for salvation. In German one speaks of being whole, *heil*, from which we get hale, heal, health, whole, and other related words. Further, Jesus in German is called the *Heiland*, savior.

Still further, we Christians say that our goal is to be holy – in German, *heilig*. We want to be whole. It is this search for wholeness, for holiness, that all of us humans have in common. It is a search that comes from within us, not from “out there”. We find it clearly stated by Jesus when he said that the goal – he called it the reign of God – is not here or there, but is *entos hymon* in the New Testament Greek, meaning both *within* you and *among* you. I find this metaphor of Jesus more helpful.