



Guidelines for Humanists engaging in dialogue with religious people

This guideline is intended to help Humanist Students and Humanist Student societies, and their religious counterparts, who want to engage in dialogue. That could take the form of a series of small group meetings - say around 6 people from each 'side' - or a larger-scale event. The guideline was developed on the basis of experience from series of humanist/Catholic and humanist/Muslim dialogues in/around London in 2013-17. We should get better at this as we learn more, so please email dialogue-officer@humanism.org.uk if you have any suggestions for improvement.

Why do it?

- The main aim of dialogue is to help build *"a world where everyone lives cooperatively on the basis of shared human values, respect for human rights, and concern for future generations"* by learning and building mutual understanding between people, addressing misconceptions, and identifying common ground. (If it makes sense, it could lead to shared action.)
- We also want to promote a better understanding of humanists and Humanism among religious people (and vice versa).
- If you get it right, it should also be interesting and enjoyable!

"Big Rules"

- This is dialogue, not a debate – there are no "winners and losers". It's as much about listening than talking.
- People participate on the basis of genuine good intentions on the part of everyone involved. There will/should be disagreement, but participants should be conscious of others' feelings and avoid confrontational behaviour. It's ok to disagree, but not to be personally disrespectful.
- The purpose is to listen, explore and understand, not to convert or convince. So avoid getting into sterile discussions about whether Christianity/Islam/Humanism... is right/wrong, or whether God exists. The premise is that the two sides agree to disagree on that. (On the other hand, this is an opportunity to explore what people from the "other side" actually think and believe, assuming that can be done in a respectful way.)

Best practices

- Aim to maximise trust & confidence, minimise anxiety & threat
- Avoid:
 - Adversarial/confrontational language – use open questions
 - Generalisations and assumptions about others (while taking the opportunity to correct misunderstandings about your own perspective)
- Actively listen
- Use "I" statements - "I think..." not "Humanists think..." No-one speaks for all humanists. If you need to generalise, say "most humanists think..."
- If a point or question comes over as aggressive, that may well not be the intention. Try re-phrasing it. For example, if someone says "You can't be moral if you don't believe in God." Try: "Do you mean 'how do humanists decide what is right and wrong, and act morally?'"



- Be open and honest - ask if it's ok to raise a sensitive topic; and be prepared to share your own feelings
- Favour nuance over black & white thinking – be curious.

Who should participate?

Small group dialogue

- If available, build on existing relationships to find potential participants - for example, through a local SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) or a faith/worldview society at your university.
- It's good to get a range of views within each side, but inevitably the participants will be self-selecting. Those who are not interested in dialogue won't come.
- Aim for around 12 people in each dialogue, which means that you'll need to develop a larger pool of interested people as you go along as not everyone will be able to attend every session.
- While the ideal is 50/50 believers/humanists, men/women, provided there are at least 2-3 people in each category, it should work.
- Aim for a core majority of participants who are common across the dialogues in the series to achieve continuity.
- Learning from the dialogue can be disseminated, formally or informally, to a wider group.

Larger dialogue events

There are many formats that you could try, which in turn have implications for who will attend. Here are two that have worked successfully:

- **"We Sit Together"** – suitable for 30-60 people. At the event, participants sit at tables, ideally over some food, where they are deliberately mixed up so that each table is diverse as possible. The aim is maximum personal encounter with people who are different. To set it up, send invitations sent to a range of religion and belief groups offering each a fixed number of places (say 10 each). Participants can be anyone from those groups who is interested. They are not there as specialists or spokespeople.
- **Panel discussions** – A more conventional stage-with-audience approach, with a panel discussion, followed by questions and answers. Suitable for any number from a dozen to several hundred.
 - Two or four panellists should work fine, ideally with a neutral chair. The panellists need to be people who both know their subject and understand/are willing to work with the dialogue approach.
 - Aim for gender balance and an appropriate degree of diversity on the stage.
 - Having well-known panellists – and/or a well-known Chair - helps market the event.
 - The audience should ideally comprise people from both "sides", so marketing is required which reaches both populations. Panellists should be able to help here.

When and where?

Small group dialogue

- Much of this is about getting to know people, so try to include an opportunity to eat together, for example, by bringing sandwiches and/or things to share.



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- Allow plenty of time, ideally about 4 hours (including breaks) – that probably means doing it at a weekend.
- Don't worry too much about finding a neutral location or sticking to the same location each time. But be prepared to respect the dress/other norms if you meet at a mosque, church or other place of worship. Don't expect people who are Muslim to want to meet in a pub!

Larger dialogue events

- Your selection will probably be driven by availability of venues of a suitable size and at a low enough price.
- For marketing purposes, it can make sense to tie-in the event with a national or international special day or period, such as "Inter Faith Week", or "Peace Week".

Practicalities

Small group dialogue

- Agree in advance a "chair" (ideally one from each side) who then decide beforehand how the meeting will work.
- Dates are always a problem. Use a tool such as <http://doodle.com/> to find one. Expect to plan at least 2 months ahead.
- Decide in advance two or three topics you plan to discuss. One way to do that is for the chairs to develop a shortlist of, say, 6 topics based on inputs from their respective sides, and then to run a ballot among planned participants (for example using <https://www.surveymonkey.com/>) to decide the priority order. See sample list below.
- At least for the 1st meeting, allow time for everyone to introduce themselves at the start, including a bit of background. (If you do that, there's no need for an "ice breaker" exercise.)
- Decide at the start if there's going to be a write-up of the discussion and, if so, who's going to draft it.
- Establish ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. In order for people not to feel inhibited in sharing their views, apply the "Chatham House Rule": anyone is free to use information from the discussion afterwards, but is not allowed to reveal who made any comment. Respect the honesty, sincerity of belief of others. Respect the chair(s). Avoid talking over others.
- If the initial event is successful, it can lead to a series of dialogues, perhaps meeting every few months. If you do that, you can agree at the end of one dialogue what you plan to discuss at the next one (though leave some flexibility in case external events throw up a new topic in the interim).

Larger dialogue events

- "We Sit Together" events
 - Get the names of all the participants in advance, so that you can see who actually turns up and, ideally, provide them with name badges (or get them to write their own). If you want to retain that information though, you will have had to ensure their explicit permission, making clear what you want to use it for.
 - As people enter the venue, ensure they divide up to sit at tables where they will encounter people from different backgrounds.



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- Have a “host” who begins the event by welcoming people and who sets the “dialogue tone” (or have someone else cover that).
 - Arrange for each table to have a facilitator who has had a basic briefing about the format. The facilitator is also a participant, but they get everyone to introduce themselves and then guides them through a suggested short set of questions/topics decided in advance by the organisers, ensuring everyone has a say (important if some have better English than others).
 - In deciding the questions, choose topics which will enable people to bring out points from their own religion or belief tradition. For this type of event, it’s probably best to avoid controversial topics, as the participants are “ordinary people” not spokespeople.
 - Ideally, provide food so that people can socialise at their tables. It’s simplest to go for vegetarian food to minimise complications. If there are participants who need kosher food, then talk with them separately to decide how best to handle that (they may well choose to bring their own).
 - Money: if you’re lucky, you may be able to find a venue which does not charge. But even then, if you provide food, there will be a cost. It is far better for this type of event to be free for participants. So look for a funder. This type of activity is widely seen as “a good thing” so local authorities or other sources may be prepared to make a small grant.
- Panel discussions
 - Both to cover the venue and other costs and to give an incentive for people to make a commitment to turn up, it’s worth charging a small amount for tickets. (If you use Eventbrite, Billeto or a similar ticketing tool, be careful as their fees mean that you can make very little if the price is too low.)
 - If you want to use names/email addresses for the future, you must ask people for a positive “opt in”, using a question such as “Your data will be [shared with xxx, or used for yyy]. Do you consent to being contacted by? You can change your communication preferences at any time.” With a Yes/No option. Eventbrite provides an option to handle that.
 - Although this is about dialogue, there are many forms of both dialogue and debate. Good dialogue should include (respectful) disagreement, and potential audience members may find that attractive. So don’t be afraid to use a controversial title, provided it’s clear that the event is not a traditional debate. For example, “*Islam & Atheism – Irreconcilable Enemies? How can humanists & Muslims make it work?*” was used successfully for an event in London in 2017.
 - Use the “welcome” at the start to set the tone and explain the nature of the event. Explain the difference between dialogue and debate, and make clear what the event is NOT about (such as debating the existence of God)..
 - Agree in advance a few broad topics that the Chair will ask the panellists to cover (you could even agree the actual questions). But don’t over-engineer it – the discussion needs to be able to flow naturally, under the Chair’s guidance.
 - Make sure there is plenty of time for questions at the end. The Chair should ensure that people ask actual questions – even if they give a bit of pre-amble – as there will



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often be those who simply want to make a rambling speech.

People usually respect requests from the Chair, but it's worth having a plan for what to do if they fail to do so.

- If the event is public and likely to prove very controversial, then talk to the venue about security, and consider whether the police should be made aware of the event. But in general, the people attracted to this type of event are not those who will seek to be disruptive (though they can be emotional).

Sample topics

- *Where do our values come from? How do our moral concepts differ?*
- *Secularism - what do we mean? Is there a version we could all agree?*
- *Common ground - In what way would we have to change (ourselves, attitudes, institutions, etc) to be able to (better) work together for the benefit of all ?*
- *Freedom of expression - what should be its limits? What should happen when limits are exceeded? The right (or otherwise) to criticise others' beliefs.*
- *What do we mean by "God"?*
- *Governance - moving on from multi-culturalism, localism etc - How can we all live under the same political system and feel validated and included?*
- *Why are secularists so aggressive about religion?*
- *Sex and sexuality.*
- *Feminism/women in society.*
- *How do we reach moral judgements? What is the difference from faith and non-faith perspectives?*
- *Other controversial topics, including the link (if any) between our various views and our religious/non-religious beliefs:*
 - *Abortion*
 - *Assisted dying*
 - *Environmental issues such as nuclear power*
 - *Nuclear disarmament and/or war in general.*