

Guideline for humanists engaging in small group dialogue with religious people



This guide is intended to help humanists, and their religious counterparts, who want to engage in dialogue involving small groups, say around 6 people from each 'side'. It was developed on the basis of experience from series of humanist/Catholic and humanist/Muslim dialogues in and around London in 2013-16. 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 learn and build mutual understanding between people, address misconceptions, and identify common ground (If it makes sense, it could lead to shared action).
- If an initial event is successful it can lead to a series of dialogues, meeting every few months.
- Learning from the dialogue can be disseminated, formally or informally, to a wider group.

Ground rules

- This is dialogue, not a debate – there are no “winners and losers”. It’s more 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.
- 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, etc.
- This is not a futile exercise in persuading people to change their fundamental beliefs. Avoid getting into sterile discussions about whether Christianity/Islam/Humanism... is right or 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).
- There are wide ranges of views among, say, Muslims or Christians, and among humanists. Everyone participating in the dialogue is doing so as an individual, not as a spokesperson or representative of their religion or belief, so try to use “I” statements rather than generalising. For example, “I don’t think God exists”, as opposed to “we humanists don’t think God exists” (some are agnostics).

Who should participate?

- If available, build on existing relationships to find potential participants - for example, through a local SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education).
- 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, meaning 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.

When and where?

- 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.
- Allow plenty of time, ideally about 4 hours, including breaks. Which might mean 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!

Other practicalities

- 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 2 or 3 topics you plan to discuss. A way to do that is for the chair to develop a list of 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. You can agree at the end of one dialogue what to discuss at the next one (though leave flexibility in case external events throw up a new topic in the interim).
- 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 who will draft it.

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.*