

~ The American Islamic Congress ~

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A New Guide to Muslim Interfaith Dialogue

Introduction

Religious pluralism – as exemplified by interfaith events – is one of our society’s greatest assets. Americans embrace pluralism because of our overriding faith in the dignity of individuals and the groups that they form, whether that dignity rests on religious or non-religious foundations. As individuals and groups, we comprise a variety of perspectives, personalities, ideas, and emotions.

Interfaith dialogue – in its American context – is in many ways a new phenomenon for Islam. In the United States, civil society has matured to the extent that people of different religions can meet and discuss each other’s faith on equal, respectful terms that reach mutual understanding. This occurs despite the fact that the central narratives and tenets of different religions often directly contradict one another. At the same time, interfaith dialogue with Islam is also new for America, as religious leaders struggle to engage the country’s new fastest-growing religion.

We want to help American Muslims celebrate diversity and difference, driven by a commitment to respect and receptiveness. This guide is designed to be both reflective and practical, to help Muslims and non-Muslims come together to strengthen what is best about America and our respective traditions.

The Problems so Far

In many communities across the country, there has been a critical breakdown in dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Part of this is due to strong undercurrents of hate speech in segments of the community, stemming from interpretations of religious traditions, political conflicts, and general ignorance. Moreover, since September 11, 2001, many Muslim Americans are confused about how to engage the American public.

- **Interfaith dialogue is not about conversion.** Some peoples’ conception of interfaith dialogue is focused on conversion, rather than mutual understanding. There are many

Judaism. These publications reflect an attachment to the debates of an earlier era, not a contemporary respect for religious diversity. Conversion of non-Muslims should not be the aim of Muslim outreach programs. A dogmatic approach to interfaith encounters encourages suspicion and competition not coexistence, parochialism not pluralism.

- **Interfaith dialogue is not about politics.** Interfaith exchanges sometimes also become an excuse for advancing political agendas. Muslim spokesmen sometimes use events to push foreign policy positions on Iraq, Israel, Kashmir, and US influence abroad. When this happens, Islam is not engaged on its own terms, but rather becomes a platform for politics – as if all 1.2 billion Muslims share the same political views.
- **Non-Muslims should not see Muslims as exotic.** On the flip side, many Americans see Muslims as exotic “others,” and interfaith discussions often remain stunted at the superficial level: “Oh, you make hummus at home! And what is the cloth on your head called?” The religious discussion rarely goes beyond basic theological differences and simple cultural trappings.
- **Religions should not be reduced to simple generalizations.** Often, dialogue begins and ends with the point that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are all monotheistic faiths. There is little exploration of how these religions developed historically and culturally in distinct ways over centuries. Nor is there much exploration of how people of different faiths can learn from one another in the present. Non-Muslims approach these exchanges either with hostility to a “jihad religion” or with a tendency to gloss over points of controversy. As a result, religions are boiled down to simplistic ideas, without consideration of the diversity of interpretation within each religious tradition. Presenters often make statements such as, “X is true Islam, but Y is not.” These simplifications suppress the vital but muted debate that has taken place historically and is currently taking place beneath the surface in Muslim communities. Understanding of one’s religion and place in the world can only take place in a context of open discussion, within one’s own community and in dialogue with other communities.
- **Interfaith dialogue is an opportunity.** In our free and open society, religious groups can share their solutions not only for reconciling tradition and modernity, but also for the pressing problems of the day. As new comers to America, Muslim immigrants, through interfaith dialogue, can take the opportunity to learn about how other religious communities have come to terms with their traditions within the American experience. But if Muslims and non-Muslims engage in circuitous interfaith encounters, then they cheat themselves, and miss out on the wonderfully diverse experience of engaging peoples of all faiths in 21st century America.

The Five Pillars of Interfaith Dialogue

Our approach to interfaith dialogue rests on five pillars:

- I. **Islam is a dynamic civilization with a rich history.** Islam is not a collection of religious tenets that exist in a vacuum. The development of Islam occurs in historical context. Islam, like all religions, has faced challenges in adjusting to modernity and encountering other religions. Islam is a dynamic civilization that is today in the process of reconciling itself with the challenges of modernity in communities throughout the world.
- II. **Islam is not monolithic.** Muslims have a wide diversity of religious and political views. Just as Christians and Jews are not monolithic in their practices and politics, so too are Muslims diverse. For instance, there is the massive ethnic and religious diversity within Islam, ranging from the skeptics to fundamentalist, Sunnis to Shi'is, Arabs to Indonesians – all of whom represent and participate in one way or another the diversity that is Islam.
- III. **Break the silence.** We should feel comfortable discussing hot-button cultural and political matters. Muslims can achieve genuine dialogue with others if we generate open dialogue amongst ourselves. We should empower everyone in our community to not feel discouraged or intimidated about speaking their minds. This involves encouraging people to ask difficult questions in a friendly manner and to get to the heart of each other's concerns.
- IV. **Self-criticism is a sign of strength.** American Muslims can take the lead in working for a brighter future for the Muslim world. Rather than shy away from shortcomings, we should feel free to address the massive problems facing the Muslim world: the threat posed by radicals who advocate violence and religious supremacy based upon their interpretation of religious texts; the social status of women; the treatment of minorities; and the lack of civil society, democracy, and economic development.
- V. **Reach out beyond Jews and Christians.** We should be careful not to limit dialogue to Christianity and Judaism. Given Islam's troubled history with polytheistic and post-Muhammad faiths, we must begin to engage the many other religions that are blossoming in America alongside us: Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto, Baha'i, etc. If we can establish constructive dialogue with these groups, we will be opening up a new chapter in Muslim interfaith dialogue.

Getting Started

There are several steps that you can take to begin organizing and participating in interfaith dialogue events.

- **Find a dialogue partner.** Contact leaders or active members of your local churches, synagogues, Hindu temples, or other religious or interfaith organizations and simply ask if they would be interested in participating in an interfaith dialogue. It could also be helpful to speak with other members of your local Muslim community beforehand to get a sense of how many people might be interested in attending an interfaith dialogue event.
- **Start small.** Large-scale events, though desirable, are extremely difficult to organize. It takes experience with planning and attending small-scale events (e.g. holiday celebration, interfaith meal, joint community service activity) to successfully organize an event that includes hundreds of participants. Smaller-scale events that involve no more than a couple-dozen participants offer the advantage of intimacy, which can better create an atmosphere of sharing and openness.
- **Forge a bond at the leadership level.** Even if you do not plan to organize an interfaith event for a while, it is very important to establish and maintain a dialogue with leaders of the communities that you hope to engage. If leaders develop a relationship, then it is much easier for community members to follow suit.
- **Talk ahead of time.** Before participating in an event, meet in advance with non-Muslim leaders to discuss concerns your community members may have with interfaith dialogue. Openness ahead of time will resolve tensions that may exist amongst participants.
- **Seek ways to continue to build dialogue.** Relationships often fade if they are not maintained. Once an event is planned, you should try to quickly plan future events with the same group and extend the dialogue to other related groups.

Suggested Activities

Working within the framework of the our 5 five pillars of Muslim interfaith dialogue, we propose a set of activities and suggested readings that can be used for conducting interfaith events.

- ◆ **Islam is a dynamic civilization with a rich history:**
 - ◆ To demonstrate the historical evolution of Islam to event participants, you should craft short lessons, powerpoint presentations, or handouts on specific periods and centers of Islam:
 - ◆ Mecca and Medina during the life of the Prophet Muhammad
 - ◆ Umayyad Damascus
 - ◆ Abbasid Baghdad
 - ◆ Fatimid Cairo
 - ◆ Umayyad Spain
 - ◆ Suleiman the Great in Istanbul
 - ◆ Ottoman Empire
 - ◆ When discussing Muslim life today, it is important to emphasize the recent historical and political context of extremism within Islam in contrast to the long history of Muslim thought and culture. Muslim history is filled with episodes of cultural flowering, geographical and demographic expansions, ups and downs.
 - ◆ To illustrate: Trace a Muslim concept through its history of interpretations and understandings; e.g. *Jihad* (spiritual struggle, defensive war, holy war), *Amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahi 'an al-munkar* (commanding the right and forbidding the wrong), etc.
- ◆ **Islam is not monolithic:**
 - ◆ Prepare slide shows or powerpoint presentation that exhibit the many “faces of Islam” with its multiple ethnicities and nationalities. These presentations should also include current demographic statistics.
 - ◆ Read excerpts from different strands of Muslim thought (e.g. Sunni, Shi’i, Sufi). These readings should serve as a starting point for discussing similarities and differences between groups such as Sufis, Sunnis, Shi’is, and Isma’ilis.
 - ◆ Ask each event participant to write down and share five examples of ways “you think you are different from everyone else in the room”—in other words, “What makes your experience unique?” As participants describe their uniqueness, discussion leaders should also encourage people to discuss how others can relate to these unique qualities.
 - ◆ Discuss the effects of national identity and local culture on the way Islam is understood and practiced. Compare and contrast the experiences of American, Saudi, Iraqi, Egyptian, Indonesian, Pakistani, and/or Nigerian Muslims.

- ◆ **Breaking the silence:**
 - ◆ Ask each event participant to list 10 questions that “you want to know the answers to about your own religion and the religions of your fellow participants.” Moderators will then present and discuss these questions with the group.
 - ◆ Ask each event participant to list 5 issues that “you feel get too much attention in your religious community and 5 issues that get too little attention.” Moderators will then present and discuss these questions with the group.

- ◆ **Self-criticism is a sign of strength:**
 - ◆ Distribute handouts that profile courageous social activists who are taking the lead in the Muslim world to speak out on issues of human rights, minority rights, civil liberties, and/or women’s rights.
 - ◆ Ask each event participants to write down 5 things that “you are most proud of in Islam and 5 things that you are least proud of regarding Muslim practice.” Moderators will then present and discuss participant responses. Ask members of other religious groups present to do the same with their religion.

- ◆ **Reaching out beyond Jews and Christians:**
 - ◆ Invite local Hindus and Baha’is to talk about their faiths and attend their cultural/religious events.
 - ◆ Ask to be included on the mailing list of these communities to get a better feel for their programs and for opportunities to join together.
 - ◆ Consider having interfaith panel discussions on issues that are not so religiously charged, e.g.: city council elections, faith-based funding, affirmative action, social service funding, local environmental concerns, recycling.

Who We Are

The American Islamic Congress (AIC) is a social organization dedicated to building interfaith and interethnic understanding, and supporting freedom. Our organization grew out of the ashes of September 11, 2001. The vicious terrorist attacks in New York and Washington made many American Muslims realize that we had been silent for too long in the face of extremism.

The AIC was started by Muslims in the New Haven area in October of 2001, but then quickly spread to include activists across the country. After several months of grassroots outreach and volunteer work, we launched in January with a dynamic website, an op-ed in the *Boston Globe*, and an appearance on *National Public Radio's* "Talk of the Nation." Our directors have appeared on CNN, Fox News, ABC's 20/20, MSNBC's Hardball, CBS Morning News, NPR, C-SPAN, and more.

We believe American Muslims must take the lead in building tolerance and fostering a respect for human rights and social justice. We have a responsibility to help our country rebuild from this attack, and to our religion to reassert that we are moderate and peace-loving people.

We are dedicated to representing the diversity of Muslim American life. Our members come from an array of ethnic, racial, religious, and professional backgrounds. Members and activists come from across the United States (Arizona, Tennessee, Nebraska, Vermont, Oklahoma, and beyond) and around the world (Egypt, Malaysia, Nigeria, Kuwait, Morocco, and beyond). Many non-Muslims are also enthusiastic about our efforts, and have joined in solidarity.

We have helped organize and participated in numerous interfaith events, including a memorial vigil for Daniel Pearl, panels with Church Women United, and an interfaith tour with an imam, a minister, and a rabbi from the Middle East.