

## CHAPTER II

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# GUIDELINES FOR INTRA- FAITH AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DIFFERENCES between people of the same or different religions are natural. And yet those differences are often denied. For example, an imam in New York was asked to create a council of imams in his city to address Muslim differences on issues that impacted their communities. He refused to do so on the grounds that “it is not needed.” As a result, differences continued to divide the Muslim community. Even when intra-Muslim differences are acknowledged, there is a reluctance to address them. Once when he was presenting a paper on interfaith dialogue at an ISNA educational conference in Chicago in 2006, Muhammad Shafiq was asked about intra-faith dialogue. He stated that intra-faith dialogue was even more difficult than interfaith dialogue.

Such anecdotal evidence suggests that Muslim leaders find intra-faith dialogue harder than interfaith dialogue. In general, most imams and Muslim leaders have not been trained in the rules and etiquette of intra-faith dialogue, whereas many leaders of other faiths have had a long-standing engagement with this type of dialogue and thus are far more open to listening and learning. They have grown in confidence through practicing their dialogic techniques in their internal and external conversations.

Developing the basic skills needed for successful dialogue and communication can have positive influences on Muslim communities, especially in the West. The lack of such skills is a significant reason for the instability and poor management of many mosques. Many mosque

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leaders may be good workers, but they have little experience in management, dialogue, and conflict resolution. Many leaders still believe and practice the strategy of ‘silencing by authority.’ As a result, many mosques and other Muslim institutions controlled by a single entity are perceived as being more stable than those run by the community.<sup>1</sup>

However, when living within the Western communal context, interfaith dialogue becomes a necessity, and intra-Muslim dialogue becomes even more essential to building a better understanding between Muslims. Intra-faith dialogue can be an effective vehicle for building Muslim solidarity and unity, especially on issues that require the sacrifice of one’s time and resources. A weak community cannot deliver, and thus stands on the receiving end. As the Prophet said, the giving hand is always better than the receiving one.<sup>2</sup> Although a community may be small, better organization will make its outreach efforts more effective. A better-organized Muslim community will always gain more respect and have a greater impact on interfaith dialogue than a disorganized one.

There should not be any argument about the value of such dialogue and the practices necessary to strengthen it. After all, the Qur’an stands for respecting the diversity of opinions between members of the same community and between people following different religions. Religious freedom, as regards practices and beliefs, is guaranteed in Islam. The Qur’an asks people to respect each other’s beliefs and to live in peace. Before Islam, the Jews and Christians were living in hostility in Arabia and the Roman Empire. They could hardly tolerate one another, and persecution in the name of religion continued. When Allah chose Muhammad to be His Prophet in 610 CE and began to reveal the Qur’an to him, the guidelines for peaceful coexistence and dialogue were outlined. Every dialogue, whether between individuals, communities, or religions, should reveal the beautiful way of the Prophet and the ethics of disagreement as put forth in the Qur’an and the Sunnah. These models represent the very foundation and essence of dialogue, from which may be derived a guidance that holds true today.

## *Guidelines for Intra-faith and Interfaith Dialogue*

### *Guiding Principles:*<sup>3</sup>

The following principles are part of a training technique to bring awareness and create a mindset in the community of how to behave, build relations, and discuss issues of commonality and difference in a cordial atmosphere. The following principles would help in fostering peaceful understanding and living together:

*Control Over Nafs* (desires, inner-self): Controlling the *nafs* is the most important requirement in intra and interfaith dialogue. *Nafs* prompt a person to look for self-interest and prestige, comfort and money, and higher status at the cost of Islamic principles. Following the dictates of *nafs* is *hawa* (desires, lust). The Qur'an has condemned in strong words the following of *hawa* (2:120). By following *hawa*, an individual is following Satan and Satan is people's worst enemy (Qur'an, 17:53; 7:22; 12:05). It is the work of Satan to present things before man in an attractive and beautiful manner.

*Large Heartedness and Forbearance*: The Prophet was *awsa' al-nas sadran* (the most large hearted among people). When leading a Muslim community or preaching the words of God, it is common to hear verbal abuse, harsh words, and false accusations, and even to be persecuted. Patience is extremely important on such occasions. Our Prophet stayed calm, polite, and dignified on such occasions. Muhammad never showed any resentment or anger, but bore all the hardships with patience and perseverance.

*Universal in Character*: A Muslim Intra and Interfaith leader must refrain from tribalistic and nationalistic tendencies. Tribalism and nationalism are the enemies of Islam and Muslims. Prophet Muhammad stood above tribalism and ethnocentricity, and that brought tremendous success to his mission of Islam. Islam does not deny the reality that people are born into their families, divided into tribes and nations. Islam never tried to eliminate tribes and nations. The presence of Turks, Persians, Indians, Malays, and many African tribes outside of the Arabs are the proof of Islam's accepting attitude toward them.

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Their culture and language were protected. Their historical documents were saved and literary research in their culture was encouraged.

*Raising Voice:* The Qur'an prohibits raising voices in meetings and dialogue. Abu Bakr and 'Umar once raised their voices in a meeting in presence of the Prophet, the Qur'an admonished them and others:

O you who have attained to faith! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, and neither speak loudly to him, as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your [good] deeds come to nought without your perceiving it. Behold, they who lower their voices in the presence of God's Apostle - it is they whose hearts God has tested [and opened] to consciousness of Himself; [and] theirs shall be forgiveness and a reward supreme. (49:2-3)

*Speak Softly:* When Allah asked Moses and Aaron to invite Pharaoh to Islam, He told them to use a soft and gentle form of speech: "But speak unto him in a mild manner, so that he might bethink himself or [at least] be filled with apprehension" (20:44).

*Be Polite and Gentle and Avoid Harshness<sup>4</sup>:* Prophet Muhammad was known for his politeness: "And you (stand) on an exalted standard of character" (68:4). Allah praised his politeness and gentleness: "And it was by God's grace that thou [O Prophet] didst deal gently with thy followers: for if thou hadst been harsh and hard of heart, they would indeed have broken away from thee. Pardon them, then, and pray that they be forgiven. And take counsel with them in all matters of public concern; then, when thou hast decided upon a course of action, place thy trust in God: for, verily, God loves those who place their trust in Him" (3:159).

*Suppress Anger and Be Forgiving:* The use of offensive words during a dialogue often results in tension. The Qur'an advises Muslims to overlook and forgive for the sake of the common human good: "Those who spend [in His way] in time of plenty and in time of hardship, and hold in check their anger, and pardon their fellow-men because God loves the doers of good" (3:134).

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*Do Not Speak Ill of Others or Their Religion:* The Qur'an says: "But do not revile those [beings] whom they invoke instead of God, lest they revile God out of spite, and in ignorance: for, goodly indeed have We made their own doings appear unto every community. In time, [however,] unto their Sustainer they must return: and then He will make them [truly] understand all that they were doing" (6:108). Speak only about your own religion, thereby avoiding direct criticism of other people or their religions: This is essential for avoiding conflict. Dialogue cannot happen if the participants start criticizing each other, for such an approach always causes angry, defensive emotions to arise and leads to conflict.

*Respect For The Holy Scriptures:* The Qur'an is very respectful when it talks about the Torah and the Gospel: "Verily, it is We who bestowed from on high the Torah, wherein there was guidance and light..." (5:44). Another verse says: "And We caused Jesus, the son of Mary, to follow in the footsteps of those [earlier prophets], confirming the truth of whatever there still remained of the Torah; and We vouchsafed unto him the Gospel, wherein there was guidance and light, confirming the truth of whatever there still remained of the Torah, and as a guidance and admonition unto the God-conscious" (5:46).

*Respect For All Prophets and Founders of Faith:* The Qur'an asks the believers to be respectful to all prophets. When a name of a prophet is mentioned, a Muslim is required to say "peace be upon him." About Moses, the Qur'an says: "O Moses! Behold, I have raised thee above all people by virtue of the messages which I have entrusted to thee, and by virtue of My speaking [unto thee]: hold fast, therefore, unto what I have vouchsafed thee, and be among the grateful!" (7:144).

*Respect For Places of Worship:* The Qur'an stands for respect and preservation of places of worship. The Qur'an says: "...For, if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, [all] monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques – in [all of] which Gods name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed [ere now]. And God will most certainly succour him who succours

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His cause: for, verily, God is most Powerful, Almighty” (22:40).

*Patience:* Patience is a great virtue for “Allah is with those who patiently persevere” is found many times in the Qur’an. Interfaith dialogue is not easy. With such a diversity of people who hold many different opinions, individuals are sure to come across those views that they dislike. Patience is very useful on such occasions.

*Equal and Humane Treatment:* The Qur’an stands for the equality of races and is colorblind for all people are equal in Allah’s eyes. Muslims participating in interfaith dialogue should treat all people with equal respect and dignity. In other words, treat others as you would like to be treated. The prophet said that a believer should prefer for another brother/sister what he/she would prefer for himself/herself. Practicing the prophetic tradition would result in a better atmosphere.

*Smile and Laugh Gently:* The Prophet would smile gently and avoid laughing loudly.<sup>5</sup> During a dialogue, avoid a bored or indifferent expression; instead, maintain a cheerful countenance. The Prophet said: “Smiling at your brother is an act of charity”<sup>6</sup> and “To bring a smile to another’s face is a charity.”<sup>7</sup>

*Pay Full Attention to The Person Speaking:* Listening deeply, paying attention, and being alert are crucial to dialogue and good *adab*, as the following hadith illustrates: A man came to the Prophet and started talking directly to him just when he was about to lead the prayer. The Prophet listened attentively, as if he were saying something very important, until the man finished.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to understand the cultural manifestations of how people pay attention to each other. For example, Muslims are taught to keep their gaze down (Qur’an 24:30) when talking to members of the opposite sex, a practice that is considered offensive in the West. For example, once a non-Muslim woman complained to an imam that Muslims would never look at her when she was talking to them. She thought they were racist because when other people talked to them they either turned their faces away or looked down. She thanked the

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imam after he explained why they did this. In the West, looking directly and yet modestly at members of the opposite sex is advisable for creating better working relations. This issue could be interpreted under the category of *'urf* (cultural values), which is a component of the Shari'ah.

*Be Alert in Public:* Muslims participating in interfaith dialogue should not only look alert but also avoid hypocrisy by actually being alert – a difficult but necessary spiritual practice. It is hypocrisy to pretend to be listening when, in fact, your mind is wandering. Of course, outward behavior is important, but it should reflect sincerity. For instance, the Prophet disliked public yawning and so suppressed his own need to yawn and asked others to do the same, or at least to cover their mouths while yawning and suppress any sighs or other yawning noises.<sup>9</sup>

*Give Others The Chance to Speak:* Speak to the point, be brief, and seek permission to speak, for this is what the Prophet did.<sup>10</sup> Do not interrupt those who are talking, as doing so is disrespectful and violates the rules of polite engagement.

*Be Ready to Help and Volunteer For Community Work:* Volunteering to help the needy, the poor, the sick, or the old, and humanity in general are all core elements of Islam's teaching. Networking and involvement in civil society benefits Islam and allows further interaction for dialogue. "And worship God [alone], and do not ascribe divinity, in any way, to aught beside Him. And do good unto your parents, and near of kin, and unto orphans, and the needy, and the neighbor from among your own people, and the neighbor who is a stranger, and the friend by your side, and the wayfarer..." (Qur'an 4:36). This includes every sort of volunteer work, contributing time and money, and helping all segments of humanity.

*Be Punctual:* Punctuality is part of Islam, for all *'ibadat* (acts of worship) must be done at certain times: "And when you have finished your prayer, remember God – standing and sitting and lying down; and when you are once again secure, observe your prayers [fully]. Verily,

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for all believers prayer is indeed a sacred duty linked to particular times [of day]” (4:103).

*Dress Clean and Properly:* The Prophet said that cleanliness and purity is half of a Muslim’s faith.<sup>11</sup> Allah commanded the Prophet to keep his clothes clean: “O thou [in thy solitude] enfolded! Arise and warn! And thy Sustainer’s greatness glorify! And thine inner self purify!” (74:1-4)

The Prophet kept himself clean and pure and asked others to do so. Once he said: “Let those who have hair take care of it.”<sup>12</sup> He also said that cleanliness was half of faith.<sup>13</sup> In another hadith, he informed Muslims that the following ten behaviors are essential acts of *fitrah* (human nature): clipping the mustache, growing the beard, using the *miswak* (toothbrush), cleansing the nostrils with water, trimming the nails, washing the joints of one’s hands and feet, removing hair under the armpits, and cleansing the private parts with water. According to the narrator, the tenth may be rinsing the mouth.<sup>14</sup>

Critical to all of the above is remembering that others may perceive each Muslim to be a representative of Islam and the Prophet’s teachings. Good appearance, a positive attentive attitude, and graciousness reflect Islamic principles and attributes.

Proper etiquette and good manners are essential foundations for interfaith dialogue. Leonard Swidler (Temple University, Department of Religion) has written extensively on the principles of interfaith dialogue, which he calls “commandments.” They are summarized below.<sup>15</sup> Note that these “commandments” do not conflict with Islamic teachings, but rather reinforce the statements found in the Qur’an and Sunnah:

1. The purpose of dialogue is to learn and increase one’s understanding.
2. Participants should be engaged in dialogue within each religious community and with other religious communities. These should take place simultaneously.
3. Participants should be honest, sincere, and desire to learn and grow together with respect.

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4. Do not compare our ideals with our partner's practice, but rather our ideals with the other's ideals and our practice with the other's practice.
5. Each dialogue partner has the right to define his or her own religion and beliefs. The rest can only describe what it looks like to them from the outside.
6. Participants should abandon all of their preconceptions in order to listen to others with sincerity and openness.
7. Dialogue can take place only between equals. Therefore, do not try to dominate or treat others as inferior.
8. Dialogue must take place in an atmosphere of mutual trust.
9. Participants entering into dialogue must be willing to reflect upon themselves and their own religious tradition.
10. Participants in dialogue should attempt to experience how others' traditions affect them holistically.

From a Muslim perspective, Isma'il R. al-Faruqi<sup>16</sup> emphasized that dialogue must protect itself from degeneration into propaganda, brain-washing, or missionary activity. Interfaith dialogue, and especially theological dialogue, must adhere to the following rules to succeed:

- No religious pronouncement is beyond criticism: Like Swidler, al-Faruqi emphasized that no person should speak with silencing authority. Divine revelation is authoritative, but not authoritarian. Humanity's understanding of revelation must be based on rational argument and logical understanding. It must not be incomprehensible, irrational, esoteric, or secret.
- Internal coherence must exist: All discourse should be intelligible, not paradoxical. Paradox is legitimate when it is not offered as a final truth. Otherwise, such a discourse would be unintelligible.
- The proper historical perspective must be maintained: Dialogue must take into consideration one's religious history and context. Past history must not be viewed as redundant, for its genuine understanding leads to a successful dialogue.
- Correspondence with reality must exist: Dialogue will be better if it takes into consideration the participants' physical, ethical, and

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religious sensitivities, as well as their reality. Each person should be able to articulate his or her particular reality.

- Freedom from absolutized scriptural interpretations: All religions manifest a diversity of opinions on how to approach religious texts. The ensuing disputes and contentions have existed for centuries. A considerable degree of freedom is necessary when addressing these multiple interpretations. This freedom can ensure the greatest possible tolerance for voicing current contextual issues.

Dialogue should be carried out in areas where there is a greater possibility of success, such as ethical duties: Participants can emphasize that mutual understanding can be achieved in the areas of ethics, morality, family, and issues of social justice in the service of humanity, despite the theological differences that have emerged within and between Islam and Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Richard Landau lists several other points:<sup>18</sup>

- Use our creative imaginations and our sensitivity for persons,
- All participating religious groups are to be involved in the initial planning,
- The most difficult differences should not be tackled first; rather, deal with the commonalities first in order to build trust and mutual respect,
- When comparing ideals, learn not to win, for wanting to win defeats the purpose of dialogue, and
- Maintain the dialogue as a two-way street of communication by letting no individual or group dominate. We could add that participating in interfaith dialogue is the best way to get to know people from other religions and their traditions. However, given that interfaith dialogue is not easy, one should know a great deal about other religions before engaging in this activity. Some additional guiding norms and principles of dialogue should be kept in mind, such as:
  - Practice fairness: When speaking for or about another faith, speak in a way that people of that religion can affirm as accurate.
  - Express empathy: Make an honest effort to appreciate the appeal of the other religion to those who are attracted to it and to understand

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its meaning and functions for them and how it makes sense to them.

- Avoid misusing scripture: No one shall attempt to use one's own religion to dismiss another religion as invalid.
- Stay open to being changed and challenged: Each participant shall stay open to all suggestions and be ready to accept a collective opinion that contradicts any participant's belief.
- Steer clear of denunciations or debates: Dialogue is not a debate, and no dialogue can occur when one side seeks to denounce the other.
- Show reciprocity: Each side should apply the same standard to itself that it applies to others.
- Avoid preconditions: Insisting on preconditions usually defeats the purpose of dialogue.
- Be cautious of making sweeping generalizations: Broad generalizations obscure the ambiguities within religions and the differences among them.
- Face areas of disagreement with frankness: Having a thick skin and not getting too easily insulted are important disciplines in dealing with disagreement.
- Avoid the selective use of scripture, tradition, and history: A common error is to extract verses about violence from a religious text without taking the whole picture into account.
- Avoid assuming consensus: Participants should not assume that every issue can be agreed upon through consensus. Each religion has its own priorities.
- Emphasize that wisdom does not belong to any particular believer: Each religion is blessed with many wise and respected adherents; no religion has a monopoly on such people.<sup>19</sup>

### *Levels of Interfaith Dialogue*

When we talk about interfaith dialogue, we generally mean dialogue among religious communities in order to understand each other's religion and build bridges toward a pluralistic and peaceful society. However, there are different levels and forms of interfaith dialogue. A clarification of terms is essential at the start: bi-lateral dialogue is a

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dialogue between two religions, whereas multilateral dialogue involves three or more religions.

The level of interfaith dialogue varies according to the venue in which it occurs: on a university campus as various student activities, within a formal institution between scholars or religious leaders, or in a multi-generational cultural exchange involving a meal as a social dialogical form of interfaith peacebuilding. Examples of different levels of dialogue are theological discussion, social exchange (interfaith picnic or food event), social action, educational exchange, partnership exchanges, campus exchanges, and cultural exchanges.

It is important to determine the particular level of dialogue one is pursuing when selecting the participants and topics. By increasing the participants' awareness and sensitivity to the type of dialogue envisioned, tailoring their expectations to their level of understanding, and clarifying the reason for entering into dialogue, the dialogue planners can avoid needless confusion and disappointment and encourage a more successful result.

Who are the potential participants in such events? One has to consider this question carefully, particularly when it comes to group diversity. An engineer who is not an Islamic scholar may feel uncomfortable in a formal setting discussing theology and philosophy with Islamic, Christian, or Jewish scholars, especially if the dialogue goes beyond his or her educational background and experience. Yet one cannot be rigid when it comes to social categorizations. For example, when setting up dialogue for male and female participants, one should not assume that only men can deal with theological exchanges or that women are best suited for partnership or social activism. There may or may not be any crossover between and among the otherwise diverse members, depending on the level of dialogical activity and the participants' particular gifts.

The participant pool can be large: men only, women only, both men and women, as well as various combinations of young people, students, religious leaders, scholars, and religious people of all faiths. A positive outcome depends on their ability to function in a manner appropriate to the dialogue's level. Yet regardless of the level, one focus characterizes them all: interfaith dialogue is for mutual

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understanding and peacebuilding, not for any kind of political, social, or theological debate. (Debate is another style of communication altogether).

A dialogue of religions: When people think of interfaith dialogue, they usually envision dialogues between or among lay followers of different religions. Such dialogues typically focus on organizing and promoting various interfaith activities: multi-generational religious-cultural exchanges, political demonstrations or actions centering on peace and nonviolence, discussions of global ethics, or planning meetings to organize humanitarian aid.

Or, they may take part in what might, at first sight, seem to be ‘simpler’ efforts, such as religious-social activities (e.g., interfaith gatherings over a meal or a “living room” dialogue including visits to each other’s place of worship to get a better understanding each other’s religion). The power of such activities should not be underestimated. Strangers become friends through such partnership programs. CAIR, ISNA, ICNA, MAS, the Muslim Mission, and many other Muslim organizations take such activities seriously. They sponsor and attend open houses, picnics, and other activities where sharing is seen as the necessary first step to acquiring a better understanding of other religions.

In Rochester, these gatherings, especially among members of the Abrahamic faiths, are called “spiritual journeys.” The Islamic Center of Rochester (ICR) typically hosts such a journey by providing food and refreshments when non-Muslim participants come to visit and learn about Islam. On such occasions, the center makes sure the imam or a community leader with an adequate knowledge of Islam and a clear understanding of interfaith dialogue leads the discussion.

Care must be taken to help certain Muslims understand what is going on during these occasions. For example, a Muslim once shouted at an imam, asking him in a challenging manner how many visitors he had converted. The imam had to explain patiently that the goal was not conversion, but building better relations. He had to clarify that interfaith dialogue dispels the common stereotypes of Muslims and offers non-Muslims a space to reflect on Islam’s goodness. This does not mean that conversion is impossible; rather, it means that

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conversion is not part of the dialogue itself. If a visitor wants to learn more about Islam, providing suitable guidance would be appropriate.

Interfaith dialogue among religious leaders: Dialogue among religious leaders is growing rapidly worldwide as they look for new solutions to the increasing divisions among people as a whole and specifically between and among adherents of all religions. Depending on the leader's personal commitment, his or her participation and guidance may encourage more interfaith dialogue. The topics of the dialogue will vary, but the leaders usually focus on religious understanding and social exchange.

Interfaith dialogue between leaders and scholars can occur formally, casually, or spontaneously depending upon the format employed. The formats may include, but are not limited to, conferences, workshops or small groups (both led by a facilitator), symposiums (a meeting of experts to discuss different opinions about a specific subject), seminars (a lecture followed by an interactive dialogue that allows participants to share experiences), and forums (a gathering to discuss common issues and concerns).

The Interfaith Forum of Rochester provides one model of interfaith dialogue among peers. Religious leaders representing their respective religions are active members. (Laypeople are not usually included in these forums). Approximately twenty-two religious groups participate. The ongoing interfaith dialogue has also created commissions, such as the Commission on Christian-Muslim Relations (CCMR) and the Commission on Jewish-Muslim Understanding (CJMU). A related group, the Muslim-Catholic Alliance (MCA), is the product of a historic agreement between the city's mosques and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester.

While more details of this type of dialogue will be provided later, we should point out here how challenging it is for the Muslim community. Christian and Jewish religious officials who participate in this type of dialogue are highly educated. In the absence of qualified imams, Muslims cannot have a serious impact on such dialogue. Even if a fully qualified imam can be found to participate, there still might be a language barrier. If this is the case, then the imam's most knowledgeable (about Islam) deputy should represent the community. But above

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all, this type of dialogue requires extensive preparation for a deeper exploration of interfaith understanding. Participants must be able to discuss social issues and action intelligently, be well versed in current events, and appreciate the importance of continuous networking and building relationships with the larger community. Imams, as the community's representatives, perform a great service to the Ummah by being included as equals in such non-dialogical events as press conferences, presentations, and conferences, especially those concerned with community planning, responses to current events, and crisis management.

On a far larger scale, and involving a greater diversity of participants, the National Cathedral (Washington, DC) has, over the years, hosted many interfaith activities in which Muslim religious leaders, scholars, and lay people have participated. The organizers of such events have been quite successful in integrating these participants with different platforms, thereby allowing space for both formal and casual dialogue.<sup>20</sup>

ISNA has made interfaith dialogue part of its mission statement and has created a leadership forum that, among other things, trains imams in interfaith work. Similarly, the Salam Institute, in collaboration with ISNA, has undertaken to organize a conference on Muslim Peace Building, Justice, and Interfaith Dialogue (see more details about the Network for Muslim Peace, Justice, and Interfaith Dialogue on the Salam Institute website).

### *Other Valuable Dialogues Among Religious Leaders Are Listed Below:*<sup>21</sup>

- In the Middle East, the Clergy for Peace brings together rabbis, priests, pastors, and imams in Israel and the West Bank for common action and witness to peace and justice in the region.
- The Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (Amman, Jordan) holds dialogues and seminars to promote better relations between the clergy and the people of the Abrahamic faiths.
- In southern India, the Council of Grace brings together Hindus,

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Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains in an attempt to address situations of community conflict.

- In the Pacific region, Interfaith Search brings together representatives of the many religions in Fiji in order to find a way to overcome prejudice and to promote mutual respect and appreciation.

*Interfaith Dialogue on Theology:* This type of dialogue occurs among faculty members. For example, Dr. Isma'il R. al-Faruqi, a leading pioneer of interfaith dialogue, participated in such efforts during the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>22</sup> This activity has produced valuable literature on interfaith matters. Increasing interest in and commitment by numerous colleges and institutes to interfaith studies as an academic subject of study has revived dialogue in academic circles. For example, Rochester's Nazareth College recently inaugurated its Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue (CISD). The Salam Institute for Peace and Justice and Fuller Seminary are working together to build suitable structures. The University of Notre Dame, the Kroc Institute, and Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding are all developing centers for interfaith theological dialogue.

*Spiritual Dialogue:* Spiritual dialogue, also called "the dialogue of religious experience," often includes a variety of participants. This more philosophical dialogue is carried out through narratives and experiences that allow people who are secure in their own religious beliefs and traditions to share their spiritual experiences (e.g., their experience of prayer or their private dialogue or experience with God). Over time, this form of dialogue is probably the most transforming for all participants, regardless of the number of people involved. Groups focused on this kind of dialogue often visit places of worship to enhance their spiritual experience. Spiritual dialogue is common all over the United States.

### *Other Levels of Interfaith Dialogue and Participants*

Any form of dialogue should concentrate, first and foremost, on people-to-people contact and interaction characterized by deep listening and

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understanding. The first step in such an undertaking is to suspend one's previous thoughts and opinions concerning the "other." In his *What the World Needs to Know about Interfaith Dialogue*, Richard Landau concentrates on this topic and urges all participants to "See others as 'people,' not just symbols or even types."<sup>23</sup>

To sum up: if the question of who can participate arises, the answer is, obviously, anyone who wants to. The key to successful interfaith dialogue is matching one's level of understanding with the dialogue's expectations (for example, does the participant want to be involved with community-based partnership or theological forms of dialogue). Appropriate matching of individuals and types of dialogues provides the symmetry and balance needed for successful dialogue. Additionally, since sustainable dialogue occurs over a long period of time, it is important to determine the participants' level of commitment and tailor the nature of the dialogue accordingly.

*The Interfaith Alliance:* An interfaith alliance is a group of religious communities that form an alliance for a common social, political, economic, or educational cause. These alliances use various forms of dialogue for different themes or issues in their effort to bring fundamental change to a particular public policy. The Interfaith Alliance, a national organization with branches all over the United States, is dedicated to such efforts.<sup>24</sup> The Interfaith Alliance of Rochester (TIAR) and Muslims are actively involved in its activities.

*Habitat for Humanity:* Muslims throughout this country are involved with non-Muslims in building homes for Habitat for Humanity. Members work together to raise funds and renovate or build new homes for the less fortunate. Rochester's Muslim community is actively involved in this program, as are Muslim organizations in Illinois, Michigan, California, and other states.

*The Hospitality Network:* This interfaith network provides temporary hospitality, usually for a week, to homeless families. Churches, mosques, and synagogues volunteer to host such families.

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*Student Communities:* Student-focused dialogues are rapidly growing on American university and colleges campuses. These dialogues bring different student groups together and facilitate common activities. Muslim communities should appoint trained imams to guide Muslim students in religious affairs, counseling, and interfaith dialogue. Many Muslim student associations need such services. When interfaith dialogue takes place, it is noticed that students who are more knowledgeable about Islam and have some background in comparative religions tend to be more sensitive to other religions. Here, we find such associations are the Children of Abraham Institute (CHAI) at the University of Virginia,<sup>25</sup> the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University,<sup>26</sup> the Student Interfaith Council at the University of Utah (SIFC-U),<sup>27</sup> the Bunting Meyerhoff Interfaith and Community Service Center of John Hopkins University,<sup>28</sup> and the Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace (ICUJP) at the University of Southern California.<sup>29</sup>

*Women's Interfaith Dialogue:* Women's groups are very popular. In many cities, and on campuses nationwide, Muslim women form groups to engage in both theological and social dialogues. As with similar groups, all Muslim participants should have a sound knowledge of Islam and other faiths as well as a mentor or imam who can support and guide them. A good model can be found at the National Cathedral whose group also supports a gender-based initiative for women of different faiths known as the "Sacred Circle." Another initiative is Boston University's Women's Interfaith Action Group.<sup>30</sup>

*Youth Groups:* Efforts are taking place, especially among young Jews, Christians, and Muslims, to form such groups. The CISD has a yearly summer program to train young people, regardless of their religion, interested in interfaith work.<sup>31</sup> The NCCJ in Detroit sponsors a good program known as Abraham's Children. Based on a return to traditional family values, Abraham's Children exposes young people to interfaith dialogue.<sup>32</sup> Another example is the Interfaith Youth Alliance of Idaho, which describes itself as follows: Interfaith Youth Alliance is a statewide interfaith project to bring diverse young people of faith

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together to: 1) connect more deeply with the parts of their own faith tradition which inspires social action; 2) learn to understand, appreciate, and respect other faith traditions; and 3) make a difference in our communities, state, and world through interfaith social action. The IYA is led by youth aged 15–25 and adult allies representing the diverse faith communities of Idaho.<sup>33</sup> Dialogue is not limited to the above participants. All Muslims should participate in interfaith dialogue to provide a more diversified representation of Islam to the community. This broad commitment will help remove stereotyping and misperceptions and build a strong, productive civil society.

### *Suggested Themes*

As stated above, dialogue has different forms and involves a diversity of people. Naturally, its themes and topics reflect this diversity. Dialogue is about communication between and among people with all of the complexity that such an undertaking entails. Although dialogue may develop from a discussion or a debate, it nevertheless remains a unique communication that has its own definitions, guidelines, opportunities, and outcomes.

Interfaith dialogue may have different themes depending on its form as well as the participants' level of interest, understanding, and knowledge. For example, social action is a productive common theme and may include topics related to the criminal justice system, economic justice, education, environmental justice, gender equity, health and cultural issues, global peace, peace and security, race and ethnicity, and political participation.<sup>34</sup> Below are some suggested themes.

*Faith-based Issues:* Most interfaith dialogues focus on presenting the realities of one religion to people who belong to other religions. Leaders with a background in comparative religion should facilitate the presentation. Some groups use a movie or a book to inform the group about a particular religion before engaging in any discussion, and then follow that with a question and answer session, and, finally, dialogue. Such an approach has proven to be effective.

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*Community-based Common Concerns or Issues:* These concerns could range from nuclear, environmental, or economic issues on an international or local scale to issues concerning education, governmental services, or transportation.

*Social Justice and Civil Rights:* Protecting and enhancing civil rights is another human and religious cause. Muslims should take an active part in all activities related to education, activism, lobbying, reforming the criminal justice system, and stopping the use of torture, racial profiling, and other forms of discrimination. CAIR is a leader in these areas.

*Religion and Race:* Racial equality can be a theme to which Muslims can make a particularly strong contribution by emphasizing that Islam stands for the equality of all races and forbids racism. It is important that Muslims work with both minority and majority groups to prevent discrimination in education, the workplace, and social life.

*Gender Equality:* This is an important theme for many non-Muslims in the West, not to mention the rest of the world, believe that Islam, as a religion, oppresses women and deprives them of their rights. This misconception must be confronted within the interfaith dialogue process. Muslim participants can emphasize that Islam stands for protecting the rights of both men and women. The Qur'an and the Sunnah presents the case for these rights in detail, emphasizing Islam's understanding of men's and women's complimentary – but equal – roles. It is also important to explain the difference between cultural customs and authentic Islamic teachings. For example, people in the West often believe that honor killing is a fundamental Islamic belief, whereas it is actually a localized cultural practice. Asserting gender equality may fall on deaf ears, however, if Muslim women are not adequately represented. Dialogue is an equal-opportunity activity and must be perceived that way by all participants.

*Humanitarian Aid:* Many interfaith meetings focus on providing humanitarian aid to disaster victims. Aid to the poor, the elderly, and refugees is an oft-repeated Qur'anic theme. The Qur'an instructs

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Muslims to take an active part in interfaith programs that focus on providing such aid. Muslim who help out at soup kitchens, shelters, training centers, halfway houses, and health clinics fulfill the command to give charity, one of Islam's five pillars.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the Muslim Students Association at Middle Tennessee State University cites the following Qur'anic verses and hadiths to undergird its commitment to charitable actions: The Prophet said, "Even meeting your brother with a cheerful face is an act of charity." The Prophet also said: "Charity is a necessity for every Muslim." He was asked: "What if a person has nothing?" The Prophet replied: "He should work with his own hands for his benefit and then give something out of such earnings in charity." The Companions then asked: "What if he is not able to work?" The Prophet said: "He should help the poor and needy." The Companions further asked: "What if he cannot do even that?" The Prophet said: "He should urge others to do good." The Companions said: "What if he lacks that also?" The Prophet said: "He should check himself from doing evil. That is also an act of charity."<sup>36</sup>

*Animal Rights and Protecting the Environment:* Many dialogue groups are interested in animal rights. Unfortunately, many participants, including Muslims, assume that Islamic teachings do not support protecting animal rights and consider this subject 'light' or 'not so serious.' On the contrary, the Prophet stressed the protection and stewardship of the Earth's creatures, and the Shari'ah states that animals must be killed humanely (not wastefully) and only for food (not for sport). This prohibition does not enforce vegetarianism or the non-slaughtering of animals; rather, it simply asserts that animals, when butchered, must be treated humanely and with respect.

The Prophet made it clear that humane treatment must be extended to animals that some cultures consider unclean: The Prophet related to his Companions the story of a man who found a dog panting from thirst. The man went down into a well, filled his shoe with water, and offered it to the dog to quench its thirst. The Prophet said: "Then Allah was grateful to him and forgave him his sins." The Companions asked: "O Messenger of Allah, is there a reward for us with relation to animals?" He replied: "There is a reward with (relation to) every living

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creature.”<sup>37</sup> Many Qur’anic verses and hadiths support the idea that Islam calls for protecting the environment and preserving natural resources. Muslims are told repeatedly to conserve and protect their environment – never to abuse it. Even during war, Islam prohibits the destruction of property, natural resources, and people’s livelihoods.

*Schools and Education:* An equal opportunity to education is the right of all people. Due to the immigration status of first-generation immigrant communities, many Muslims face major challenges when negotiating the educational systems into which they enroll their children. Thus, education becomes a pressing theme for discussion in an interfaith setting. By participating more actively in such discussions, Muslims can play a more direct role in improving the schools’ conditions and their curriculum and in addressing issues that are important to young people.

*Celebrating Religious Rituals and Holidays:* Given that Muslims are a minority community in the West, their religious rituals can be under-represented or marginalized. As a result, interfaith dialogue becomes important as a forum for addressing how public institutions (e.g., schools) should celebrate holidays. For example, members of Rochester’s interfaith dialogue group managed to get the local school districts to increase the amount of time devoted to teaching about the holidays of all religions and to minimize the display of the Christian majority’s religious symbols.

*Crime, Gambling, and Other Issues:* Interfaith dialogue groups can be organized around these and similar themes since they are of concern to everyone regardless of religion. Muslims should be in the forefront of advocacy against drinking, gambling, and other vices.

*Family and Traditions:* Islam has appealing and unique family traditions. Thus, Muslims should not hesitate to have a joint seminar on family life and shared values. Due to its educational nature and relatively uncontroversial nature, such discussion should attract many non-Muslim participants.

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*Extremism and fundamentalism:* Found in all faiths and societies, these existing realities are good interfaith topics. It is important that people learn to distinguish between authentic teachings and those false 'Islamic' teachings used by 'Muslims' to justify acts of terrorism. The importance of this topic derives from the current level and nature of the violence sweeping Muslim countries and from the Western response to it. Interfaith groups should address these issues in ways that are relevant to current concerns. It should be made clear that terrorism troubles Muslims just as much as it does anyone else.

*Forgiveness and Mercy:* Discussing these concepts from an Islamic viewpoint may be one of the best ways for an interfaith seminar to overcome Islam's negative image. Many people in the West believe that Islam is a religion of revenge because they do not know that its core teachings are forgiveness and mercy.

The list of potential interfaith dialogue themes and issues presented here is certainly not exhaustive. Since Muslim participants should always be prepared to provide the Qur'anic or Islamic perspective, they should come to each meeting fully prepared. Participants may need to consult their imam or a religious authority on certain issues. Seeking such advice is far better than providing incorrect information which may contribute to Islam's already negative image.

### *Planning Interfaith Programs*

To conduct successful interfaith seminars and other programs, the following elements must be taken into consideration:

*Subcommittees:* Once the participants have met and agreed upon certain guidelines, they will be faced with many other tasks. First, they will have to decide on what subcommittees they should form to realize the goals of their mission statement. There could be subcommittees for media outreach, education, social justice activities, helping victims of natural disasters, and protecting civil rights. These committees should

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meet periodically and present their recommendations to the joint commission/interfaith dialogue group.

*Planning Committees:* Since an effective interfaith encounter requires a great deal of preparation, a planning committee must be formed. Its members probably will have to meet several times to determine the program's date, time, and venue. Among its tasks are the following: preparing a flyer, publicizing the event, reaching out to potentially interested groups, selecting a coordinator, preparing an evaluation form, ensuring security, and organizing the reception and other necessary items relevant to the attendees' safety and comfort.

When setting the meeting's norms and ground rules, the leadership must agree on the following principles:

1. *Avoid proselytizing:* Make sure that speakers and others follow "listen to others as you would like them to listen to you."
2. *Distribute responsibilities:* Share the responsibilities equally. Do not seek to dominate, but consult with each other.
3. *Respect each organizer's voice:* Regardless of its size, each faith community's participation should be respected as equal to any other community's. Similarly, the greater involvement of one individual should not translate into more weight being given to his or her opinion.
4. *Manage program time consistently and fairly:* Programs should begin on time. In any seminar or forum involving a presentation, each group should be given equal time. The provision of adequate time for a Q&A session is essential. Generally, one-third of the time should be reserved for this session.
5. *Recognize tension or criticism:* Complaints or criticisms from any source should be listened to and evaluated without defensiveness. Evaluations collected after the program should be critically analyzed, and worthwhile suggestions should be implemented before the next event.
6. *Conduct programs in different places:* Interfaith programs and meetings should rotate among the participants' worship sites in order to create a sense of ownership and strengthen the bond of partnership.

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7. *Avoid all forms of domination:* No group should be allowed to chair the interfaith group, subcommittees, or planning committees consecutively. The rules should ensure the rotation of leadership.<sup>38</sup>
8. *Learn to pray together:* Meetings should begin and end with short prayers suitable for the religious groups represented. Any member could be asked to recite those prayers. If a brief prayer of blessing in the name of God is read on such occasions, Muslims should have no objections. Interfaith prayers may be given when interfaith leaders meet at a time of calamity, war, or crime. A member of each group might be asked to read prayers of peace. Muslims usually read the opening chapter of the Qur'an or Qur'an 2:63-64 on the occasion of a calamity, Qur'an 49:11-13 in the case of a civil rights violation, or simply the salaam (the prayers for peace) recited at the end of the five daily prayers.

In conclusion, any dialogue group must ensure that all parties have an equal share, equal responsibilities, and equal respect. In addition, its members must make sure that the subcommittees are working together and that the leaders are aware of what is going on at every level so that they can prevent problems before they occur. Before a dialogue group initiates any program, it should provide all members a copy of the necessary guidelines as well as sensitivity training.

### *Key Points of the Chapter*

- Intra-faith dialogue is essential for Muslim unity and understanding, and interfaith dialogue is necessary for respectful and peaceful coexistence.
- The Qur'an and the Sunnah ask Muslims not to shout, speak harshly or ill about others, or criticize others directly. Rather, they must be polite and gentle, let others speak, listen attentively, and behave properly.
- Dr. Swidler's ten points and Dr. al-Faruqi's five points could be taken as additional guiding principles for a successful dialogue based on the guidelines of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.
- Intra-faith dialogue between Muslims is almost non-existent, or at

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least certainly infrequent. Interfaith dialogue is now taking place at many levels and continues to be very successful in many areas of serving others.

- Imams in each city should create intra-faith dialogue and join local existing interfaith dialogue groups in order to serve the Muslim community better.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. Many non-Muslims have written guidelines for interfaith dialogue. Among Muslims, Dr. al-Faruqi has written on the subject. Do you know any other Muslims who have written on interfaith guidelines and/or their scope and limitations?
2. Could you suggest Qur'anic verses or hadiths as guidelines for interfaith dialogue in addition to those given above?
3. If you think that Muslims should actively participate in interfaith dialogue, do you agree with the guidelines offered above? Can you offer additional suggestions to improve dialogue? Explain.
4. If you were to participate in a dialogue, how would you prepare for it?