

# Principles and Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue

## Addressing Prejudices and Inclusivity



We are grateful to Scarborough Foreign Mission Society for their generous sharing of these resources

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## [A Safe Place to Address Prejudice, Stereotypes and Fears](#)

*In this brief article, Rev. Thomas Bonacci C.P., the founder and director of the Interfaith Peace Project in California (USA), shares ideas on how we might address our prejudices, stereotypes and fears.*

**September 14, 2011**

Several years ago I joined a small group of concerned people responding to a growing interest in appreciating and respecting the faith traditions of humankind. We developed home-based educational programs for small groups of interested people who know little if anything about religions other than their own. It began informally, spread by word of mouth, and now hundreds of workshops have been held.

We calmly and respectfully introduce the faith traditions in an elementary manner, preparing participants to visit the worship sites of the traditions involved. Eventually, participants can choose to become involved in the fine art of interfaith dialogue in pursuit of world peace. Everything depends on the comfort level of the participants.

Early on we learn that we do not encounter religions but people of faith. Questions and discussions usually focus on a tradition's followers rather than the tradition itself. While more than willing to learn what another person believes and how they practice that belief, participants express their concerns about the integrity, motivation, and trustworthiness of others. Fears, prejudices, and stereotypes emerge. This discovery invites participants to confront something within themselves.

Preparing for dialogue with others invites us to confront the depth of our own truth and experience. Large living rooms in homes provide a preferred setting. Making sure our meetings are conducted in quiet, calm, and safe situations, participants experience a certain freedom to search their minds and hearts and to confront their negative feelings about others. Such honest engagement with self is essential if honest, open, and respectful dialogue with others is to take place.

One question we invite groups to ponder asks, "What has been your experience to date of people from other cultures, religions, races, and languages?" This question helps us understand that we are not engaging a set of beliefs but real people like ourselves. What we have in common is not some aspect of faith or practice but our very humanity and experience as human beings.

A Hindu is now engaged by her name and person rather than the label of her tradition. "The Buddhist" did not attend my mother's funeral; Beverly, who happens to be a practicing Buddhist, did. Farooq is no longer identified as a Muslim but as my friend, who is Muslim. Once again, people meet people. Without a personal perspective, we fall into the trap of thinking religions meet religions rather than people of faith engaging one another. Our dialogue helps us recover the humanity of self and others. It invites us to be human and humane to ourselves and others. In fact, the "other" now becomes my companion on the road of life.

Frequently, our participants note how deep reflection opens the way to engage in dialogue with others. Since most groups have rich past experiences and varied relationships, it soon dawns on them

that they already live in an interfaith community. The neighborhood, school, hospital, shopping mall are all places and situations of interfaith encounter.

We are still in the first stages of our interfaith work, but these initial discussions are foundational to the great work yet to come. Now, more than ever, the song must be sung, “To see another person is to see the face of God.”

Participants readily admit their “interfaith education” is often in the hands of cable television news and pundits. In such a context, entire communities of people can become associated with extremists and extremism. The “we versus them” mentality clouds all perspectives. Real people are unjustly accused and forced to defend themselves in their innocence.

We ask participants in our study groups if such accusations have ever happened to them. “How did you feel? Was defense possible or explanation accepted?” These questions help participants identify with those unjustly accused and stereotyped simply because they belong to a given race or religion. As one woman said, “It is simply not fair to judge and condemn people I never really met. I would not want others to do that to me.” This kind of self-encounter and reflection goes a long way in helping us appreciate how others are injured by stereotypes and prejudices.

A young man remembered how a year earlier the local mosque was the site of arson in their town. The local and regional interfaith community rallied in a powerful gesture of solidarity. He recalled the march through the streets with banners and flags of good-will and peace-making. A diverse community rubbed shoulders. Perfect strangers became loving friends.

One person lamented, “Why does it always take violence and hate to bring us together?” Upon reflection, her lament speaks of great hope. If violence brings us together, what might respect, understanding, and mutuality cause? Her lamentation becomes a rallying call to confront our fears. Our participants speak of their fears of meeting someone from a faith tradition other than their own. Prejudices and stereotypes are one thing. Fears are crippling. So in our discussions we turn the fear question around, asking, “In what way do you think others might be afraid to meet you?” Frightened people are rarely aware that they themselves can be frightening. Encountering how we might frighten others empowers us to be sensitive to others.

Prejudices, stereotypes, and fears do not mean one lacks good will. We learned, though, that even with good will, we will not overcome our fears and prejudices if we cannot safely address them. Our project is a first-stage attempt to help people confront and transform their fears. The assurance of safety and respect, the lack of judgment, and the willingness to identify with their struggles, creates a confidence by which others can be engaged in respectful, compassionate, and loving ways.

## One Muslim's Interfaith Resolutions

*Sohaib Saeed is a Scottish Muslim writer who is currently specializing in Qur'anic studies at Al-Azhar University (Egypt). I am sure you will appreciate the depths of his nine interfaith resolutions. See link below:*

**June 15, 2012**

### **Wrestling with the Golden Rule**

The following resolutions were framed by Sohaib Saeed as the conclusion to his paper titled, "The Golden Rule: an Islamic-Dialogic Perspective". The longer paper demonstrates how deeply and constructively Saeed reaches into both the Golden Rule idea and Islam to come to resolutions from which every one of us can benefit.

- 1.** I will try to understand people's faiths as they understand them, paying special attention to writings from within the tradition. I might read outsider critiques, but will avoid treating them as though they were primary sources or the final word. I will treat any commentary on religion appearing in the media, especially the most commercial parts of it, with a very healthy measure of skepticism
- 2.** I will try to engage personally with people of other faiths, to appreciate how their principles are lived in the world. While good character will impress me, I will take care not to judge the religion by the actions of any individual, least of all those who violate its teachings or perpetrate crimes in its name.
- 3.** If studying scriptures and key texts of other faiths, I will do so humbly, remembering that translation is a human effort, and that literacy is more than just deciphering words. I will not rip words from their context in order to prove a point. I will not turn a blind eye to the commentary and explanation that believers have offered to their texts over the centuries.
- 4.** I will not rush to develop theories about a religion based on a few aspects I know about in a superficial way. I will try and keep my prejudices and assumptions in check. I will try to interpret things in the best light, and seek clarification on things that I find troubling.
- 5.** I will not present myself as an expert on someone else's faith, when there are people who have spent their lives immersed in all things related to it. Yes, I may gain a qualification to speak on various aspects, perhaps more authoritatively than many lay-believers, but I should defer to those who deserve it and consult them when needed. When speaking on another faith, I will represent its positions in a way that I believe its followers would agree to be accurate.
- 6.** I will take care not to impose my own favored terminology on another faith group, especially where that will breed misunderstanding. I will also strive to understand their terminology and conventions. Above all, I will not judge by names and labels, but look beyond them to concepts and realities.

**7.** I will not take it upon myself to divide up the followers of another religion into “goodies and baddies,” conflating, in the process, matters of religion with politics, culture, geography and so on. I will not demand of people to renounce any aspect of their religion in order to join the club of acceptability. I will not play the childish game of smearing by association.

**8.** I will not use sensationalist language to stir controversy. I will not use my “right to offend” – if I have one – to stamp on what others call sacred. I will neither denigrate respected figures of a faith community, nor describe the expression of their religion’s teachings as being “hate speech,” especially when it comes straight from scripture.

**9.** I will try to take benefit from criticisms of my beliefs, and not jump to accuse those who offer them of bigotry and malign intent. I will not misrepresent political stances that disagree with mine as being attacks on my faith and community.

Finally, I pray to Almighty God for the guidance of others, hoping that His angels will carry my supplication, saying all the while: “And for you too.”

## Tips for Interfaith Families: How to Make a Seder Inclusive

*Unlike most Jewish holidays, Passover is observed primarily in the home. And the Passover seder, or ritual meal that marks the start of the festival, is that Jewish holiday with the highest participation rate. An important Jewish value is to invite strangers to the seder which celebrates freedom. These nine guidelines are designed to enable non-Jews and interfaith families to feel more comfortable with the holiday's rituals and traditions.*

**Created by InterfaithFamily.com**

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The second annual Passover and Easter Survey, conducted by InterfaithFamily.com ([www.interfaithfamily.com](http://www.interfaithfamily.com)), an independent non-profit publisher and advocacy membership association, found that Passover is an important holiday for interfaith families, with 99 percent of respondents saying they plan to celebrate Passover this year -- up from 92 percent last year. An important Jewish value is to invite strangers to the seder, which celebrates freedom. The following tips are designed to make non-Jews feel more comfortable with the holiday, rituals and traditions.

1. Prepare your partner, children, and non-Jewish guests. As more and more non-Jewish partners and non-Jewish stepchildren attend seders, letting them know what to expect will be helpful. Whether you are hosting or attending a seder, explain what will happen, who will be there, what will be eaten and when, and what they will be asked to do during the meal. Tell everyone that welcoming non-Jews to the seder makes it a special and more valuable occasion and that the purpose of the seder is not to proselytize anyone, but to celebrate freedom.
2. Select the right hagaddah, the book that contains the order, blessings, narrative and songs for the seder. There are hagaddahs to reflect different approaches and needs, from traditional to liberal, from recovering alcoholics to feminists to vegetarians and more. Consider selecting a hagaddah that:
  - Uses Hebrew with aligned translation and transliteration, so that people unfamiliar with Hebrew are better able to follow along.
  - Is inclusive and reflects gender equality.
  - Provides background and explanations for the rituals.
3. In advance of the seder, rephrase parts of it to be more welcoming to the people who will be coming to it. Doing this with your partner's and/or children's help, might enable them to feel more a part of things and can unite the family.
4. A writer for InterfaithFamily.com wrote some wonderful blessings to add to the seder that specifically welcome non-Jews. Visit this URL to find them:  
<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=ekLSK5MLlrG&b=297378&>

ct=330212 You can include some or all of these in your own seder, or write your own blessings, with your family.

5. Assign everyone passages from the hagaddah to read aloud during the seder. Participating in this way can give your partner, children and friends a better opportunity to experience the seder. Review the hagaddah before the seder to identify appropriate sections for them.
6. Connect the story of the Passover liberation story to other freedom stories, past or present, political and/or psychological (such as freedom from negative patterns). If there are particular struggles that people attending your seder would relate to (such as the struggle for independence in India if an Indian woman will attend), be sure to mention them. Or discuss ten "plagues" that we face today. This discussion may engage your partner, children and friends.
7. Have fun. Seders can be relaxed and informal. According to Ron Wolfson, a leading Jewish educator and the author of *Passover: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration* (Jewish Lights Publishing), some families add favorite songs that children learn in religious school, such as "Go Down, Moses," "One Day When Pharaoh Awoke in His Bed," and others. A favorite parody is *Only Nine Chairs* by Deborah Uchill Miller (Kar- Ben Copies), a hilarious account of a family seder. For more tips on having fun at your seder, visit this <http://www.interfaithfamily.com/site/c.ekLSK5MLlrG/b.307184/apps/s/content.asp?ct=556489>
8. Don't forget the children. Traditional seders may have only three highlights for children: the Four Questions, the Ten Plagues, and the search for the afikomen. Non-Jewish children attending seders may only pay attention to the last two. Some families have created a "Pat the Bunny"-type hagaddah for young children, using coloring sheets and cotton balls on pictures of sheep, sandpaper on pictures of bricks of the pyramids, grape scratch-and-sniff stickers on pictures of the kiddush cups. Some even give children "goody bags" filled with Passover symbols, frog stickers, even moist towelettes for the inevitable spills of wine.
9. After the seder, talk with your family about the ways in which they felt comfortable and uncomfortable. Find ways to diminish any discomfort for the coming year's seder.



## A Declaration of Interdependence

*On a planet-wide scale we are now witnessing the convergence of two international movements – interfaith dialogue and social justice. People active in both movements are realizing that they can create a better world by cooperating with one another. In 1997, an extraordinary document linking social justice to interfaith dialogue was produced and signed by 22 faith communities in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Here is the link to the Declaration:*

*WE*, as faith group representatives, declare our interdependence with those who are living in poverty in our local community as well as in the world community.

*WE DECLARE* that we are all united in the spirit of one God, and that we are called to uphold the spirit of universal interdependence with our sisters and brothers of all faiths.

*WE DECLARE* that it is an offense to our faith that some enjoy an abundance of this world's goods while the quality of life of others is restricted by hunger, by lack of proper shelter and by inability to fulfill their places in society because of poverty.

*WE DECLARE* that it is the role of governments to care for those who are unable to care for themselves, and that the provision of a compassionate social system is an absolute requirement.

*WE DECLARE* our concern that governments today are failing to provide adequately for those suffering from poverty in our society, and we call upon those whom we have elected to treat all people in their care with dignity and respect, providing sufficient financial resources so that all may have adequate food, clothing, and shelter, and access to education and health care.

*WE DECLARE* our deep concern about the growing gap between rich and poor in our society and our anger at the lack of action to redress this social injustice.

*WE DECLARE* our conviction that the failure of governments to provide adequately for persons in poverty, especially children, has drastic consequences for the future in unemployment, lack of self-fulfillment, violence, abuse, crime and illness. Investment in proper social services today will result in a higher quality of life and reduce social costs in the future.

## Why Interfaith Dialogue Doesn't Work – and What We Can Do About It

*In this challenging article, Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, an American Reform rabbi and past-president of the Union for Reform Judaism, shares ideas on how interfaith practitioners can move beyond the superficial and into deeper levels of authentic interreligious dialogue.*

I have been participating in interfaith dialogue as a rabbi and Jewish leader for more than 30 years, and most of the time it just doesn't work.

Most of the time — and it is painful for me to admit this — it is terribly boring. Most of the time there is a tendency to manufacture consensus, whether it exists or not. Most of the time we go to great lengths to avoid conflict. Most of the time we cover the same ground that we covered last month or the month before. And far too often we finish our session without really knowing the people across the table and what makes them tick religiously.

And most of the time we are satisfied with mouthing a few noble, often-repeated sentiments. Thus, we affirm the importance of mutual understanding, tolerance and dialogue; we assert that all human beings are created in the image of God; we proclaim that despite our differences, all of our traditions preach love of humankind and service to humanity. Nothing is wrong with these sentiments, of course; in conceptual terms, I believe in them all. But if we don't dig beneath the surface and focus on substance rather than rhetoric, they mean very little.

The result is that most of the time, interfaith discussions are simply excruciating, irrelevant to me and to the world around me. Why then have I been so involved for so many years?

The reason is that very occasionally, something extraordinary happens: One of these conversations changes me, binds me to my colleagues, advances my understanding of myself and others, and adds texture and depth to my own religious beliefs and convictions.

In thinking back on these moments, it seems to me that there are three things that make for a “good” dialogue and that turn tiresome interfaith conversations into meaningful religious moments. First, meaningful dialogue happens when the conversation turns to our religious differences.

Platitudes are set aside when, as representatives of our faith traditions, we cease to be embarrassed by the particular; when we put aside the search for the lowest common denominator that most often characterizes — and trivializes — our discussions; and when we recognize that absent a clear affirmation of who we are, how we are different and what we truly believe, all our conversations are likely to come to nothing.

Second, interreligious exchanges become compelling when my colleagues and partners give expression to their religious passions. I am drawn in when they share with me their deepest beliefs and strangest customs, no matter how radically other they are from my own. And the sharing of religious passions should lead to passionate debate, in which we struggle with the really hard questions: What happens when conflicting beliefs lead to conflicting interests? What do we do about those areas where differences cannot be bridged and must be dealt with?

Third, interreligious dialogue truly touches us when we can discuss what we all know to be true but what we rarely say: that, in some ways at least, we all believe in the exceptionalism of our own traditions. We all tend toward the conviction that there are some elements of our religious beliefs and practice that stand above and apart from what other religions offer, and it is liberating when we are able to acknowledge this and then explain why we think that way, without apology but open to the honest reactions of those around us.

Other high points come from those moments when we all say what it is about our own traditions and communities that we don't like and then talk frankly about why that it is so. And I am always delighted when we stop focusing on talk and start planning to work together — and really mean it. As I said, these things happen rarely. I, like others around the interfaith table, am often sitting there just going through the motions, distracted by other things and caught in the same old patterns and clichés that predominate in these settings. Still, from time to time, we find a way to speak from the heart. When we do, God's presence — variously felt and differently experienced — creates an atmosphere of faith, partnership and common purpose in the room. For those rare moments, I will continue to make the effort, without regrets.