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**FINAL PAPER**

“Successful Inter- and Intra-Faith Dialogue in California”

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“We have divided you into nations and tribes so that you might know one another.”  
Qur’an 49:13

“Compete with each other in doing good.” Qur’an 5:48

Interfaith participation has become more important since the Holocaust and Immigration Reform Act of 1965. As a positive example, inter-religious dialogue organized by American Muslims after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 helped the U.S. government to succeed in protecting its Muslim citizens from an outpouring of hate crimes following the attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> As another example, the United States Institute of Peace has reported that a January, 2002 meeting between Israeli and Palestinian faith leaders prevented violence when Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron publicly condemned anti-Muslim drawings by Jewish school children in Hebron.<sup>2</sup> The rise of

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent Biondo, “American Muslim Politics Enters the Mainstream,” Princeton University, Department of Near Eastern Studies, unpublished paper presentation, February 16, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Renee Garfinkel, “What Works? Evaluating Interfaith Dialogue Programs,” United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 123, Washington, DC, July, 2004. Available online at:  
<<http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr123.pdf> >

private religious schools, since the racial integration and increased immigration of the 1960s, means that interfaith dialogue today has even greater relevance.

## Teaching Tolerance, Hate, or Empathy

Educated Jews, Christians, and Muslims agree that increased education about world religions enriches individual faith commitments.<sup>3</sup> If the goal of religious literacy is to decrease religious-based violence,<sup>4</sup> interfaith dialogue may fail because it generally attracts only tolerant individuals in the first place. The first obstacle of interfaith dialogue that I have experienced in California is how to attract participants. Because the average age of interfaith participants in Fresno is seventy-five,<sup>5</sup> many of whom are seeking validation of their personal religious experiences, dialogue is restricted to a sharing of commonalities. For the general public trying to balance work and family, religion has to compete with other social activities beyond major holidays or rites of passage. Affluent individuals with the luxury of studying their own religion are often satisfied with their chosen faith commitment, so that other ideas are unnecessary. A Christian leader in the Fresno Multifaith Exchange expressed this well: “I am a conservative evangelical and I have been unable to convince local ministers to support interfaith dialogue, and if they don’t support us, then laypeople will not attend.”<sup>6</sup> First, is

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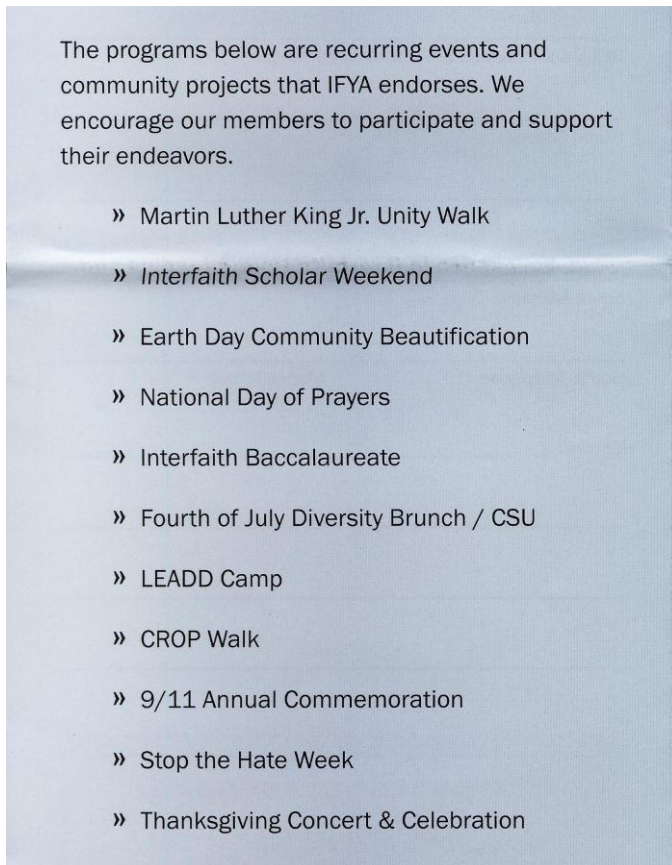
<sup>3</sup> For instance, compare the medieval philosophies of Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, and al-Ghazali. Also compare Catholic debates over the *Nostra Aetate* of Jules Isaac and Pope John XXIII from Vatican II. According to Pope John Paul II, “Respectful dialogue with others enables us to be enriched by their insights, challenged by their questions and impelled to deepen our knowledge.” From the back cover of Maurice Borrmans, *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims* (New York: Paulist, 1990, orig. 1981 Paris). See also Muhammad Shafiq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims* (Washington, DC: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> This assumes support for the rule of law according to the First Amendment of the Constitution. Compare Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy* with Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with KS, August, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with BB, September 21, 2008.

it possible to teach tolerance, and if so, how do you attract the intolerant? The Fresno Interfaith Youth Alliance has been most successful with community service projects that harness denominational competition. These include (image from scanned brochure):



Eboo Patel, of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago agrees that interfaith efforts should be service-based and limited to areas of common concern.<sup>7</sup> Recently he has joined with the Tony Blair Faith Foundation to combat malaria in Africa. Based on personal experiences, Patel writes that it is necessary to ban theology, politics, and disagreements

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<sup>7</sup> Eboo Patel and Mariah Neuroth, "The Interfaith Youth Core" in *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 169-180.

from interfaith dialogues. Instead we should identify common ethical concerns like hospitality, or the environment, or children, or hunger, or disease. Is this the best that we can do or are discussions of issues of common concern boring since they ignore the important differences that make people religious? Once we figure out how to involve the intolerant in discussions of difference, the second challenge is our lack of training for how to talk civilly about religious differences. This paper recommends interfaith best practices.

### **Interfaith Best Practices**

In Genesis 18:1-8 Abraham provides a religious role model for hospitality when he welcomes three strangers into his home. “Always serve food,” is a mantra told me by Fresno Multifaith Exchange founder Linda Mack.<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida agreed in a 1996 essay that hospitality is a higher law that the majority must extend to the minority, yet language and ancestry represent the two primary obstacles.<sup>9</sup> For him, participants should learn some foreign key terms and be prepared to bracket past grievances. Jane Idleman Smith has written that separate meetings for men and women make people from some cultures more comfortable.<sup>10</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub has written that accusations of infidel,

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Mack interview, August 15, 2008. As a great-grandmother and retired legal mediator who married outside her tradition, Linda is a sort of ideal interfaith leader.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Pas d’hospitalité,” in *Of Hospitality*, Rachel Bowlby, trans., (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000,) orig. Jan. 17, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

pagan, or heretic prevent a hospitable environment.<sup>11</sup> According to Fisher and Ury's Harvard Negotiation Project, hospitality with an objective result makes mutual gains possible.<sup>12</sup> Their most important rule applies directly to interfaith efforts that laypeople present personal experiences, not orthodox positions. The Fresno Multifaith Exchange was originally limited to believers, but this rule has been relaxed so that as many as forty participants can alternate between eight places of worship. I am not the first to try to identify interfaith best practices. Leonard Swidler authored a "Decalogue" of recommendations,<sup>13</sup> which I have compared to those of Abraham Joshua Heschel,<sup>14</sup> Eboo Patel,<sup>15</sup> the Vatican,<sup>16</sup> the World Council of Churches,<sup>17</sup> Isma'il al-Faruqi, Tariq Ramadan, and the International Institute of Islamic Thought.<sup>18</sup> I will test these further in Cardiff, Wales in Spring 2009 as a Fulbright Scholar to the United Kingdom:

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<sup>11</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981, 2nd ed. 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue," *Theoria - Praxis* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), pp. 24-29.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, pp. 235-250.

<sup>15</sup> Patel, *Building*.

<sup>16</sup> Borrmans, *Guidelines*.

<sup>17</sup> World Council of Churches, "Guidelines on Dialogue," (Geneva, 1979), pp. 1-22. Available online at: <[www.oikoumene.org/?id=6299](http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=6299)>

<sup>18</sup> Isma'il Ragi A. Al Faruqi, "Islam and Christianity: Diatribe or Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5:1, Winter, 1968, pp. 45-77. Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, p. 210.

**1) Be Non-Judgmental.** Practice epoché. Bracket or suspend judgment. Be humble. This is al-Faruqi's first principle, not to utter divine commands or make divine judgments. Heschel agrees that "there is no truth without humility"<sup>19</sup> and we should affirm our inadequacy in the face of fear and trembling. In supporting *Nostra Aetate*, Hans Küng writes that we should not instinctually reject the good or the true.<sup>20</sup> For al-Faruqi this means affirming logic, history, and science, while admitting for the possibility of divine intervention.

**2) Be Hospitable.** Provide healthy snacks. Learn foreign vocabulary and bracket past grievances. Affirm Hillel's negative golden rule. Practice active listening. Don't proselytize, yet be authentic. Affirm your faith identity (without seeking another) to avoid syncretism and relativism.

**3) Be Human.** You are an individual, not an institution, a person, not a problem. Laypeople realize this better than leaders. Reject generalities and stereotypes, because religions are not monolithic systems, but groups of imperfect humans. Discuss local differences rather than historic-international wedge issues. Acknowledge intra-faith diversity, recognize interfaith differences, and agree to disagree. Maybe an activity or sense of humor can bring out our human side.

**4) Be Organized.** Dialogue never means two. Include Jews. Find creative ways to be more inclusive. "The purpose of interreligious cooperation is neither to flatter nor to refute one another, but to help one another...to search in the wilderness for the care for man."<sup>21</sup> Identify a common enemy like excessive consumerism or dehumanizing technology. Overcome short-sighted partisanship to improve long-term quality of life. If climate change is a compelling crisis, interfaith groups can provide leadership. A united pluralistic community can better protect its women and children from terrorism and domestic abuse.<sup>22</sup>

**5) Be Active.** Once a common cause is identified, take collective action. Convince co-religionists to support your efforts.

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<sup>19</sup> Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," p. 245.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Küng, "Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam," in Leonard Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theory of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), pp. 192-209.

<sup>21</sup> Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," p. 249.

<sup>22</sup> Religions for Peace, Annual Report, 2007, pp. 6-7.

## **Reconciliation and Breaking Out of Your Comfort Zone**

Conflict is in our nature, yet we also prefer to overcome past horrors. How do we heal racial tensions in Cape Town and Los Angeles, or between Catholics and Protestants in Belfast, or Sunni and Shi'a in Baghdad or Palestinian and Israeli in Jerusalem? Can we force young people to interact with “the other” to break the chains of history? Is it possible to teach empathy? To say there were ovens and showers in Dachau for example is different from physically laying in the bunks and walking around the final bend in the path. Should we visit our co-workers, employees, or students in their homes?

## **Charity Competitions**

According to Hannah Arendt's thesis of the agonistic Athenian agora, religious communities need not necessarily cooperate, but they should compete to beautify their community.<sup>23</sup> This model has strengths and weaknesses, yet realistically matches the capitalist ethic. Arthur Waskow has written that local Jewish communities should form charity collectives, and this may help non-Jews as well.<sup>24</sup> The UMMA Community Medical Clinic in Los Angeles for instance, in providing services for non-Muslims, successfully demonstrates the full American-ness of local immigrant Muslims.

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<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York, 1958), and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Nicholson-Smith trans., (Oxford, 1991, 1974 in French).

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Waskow, *Down-to-Earth Judaism* (New York: William Morrow, 1995), esp. p. 218.



## **California Sushi**

At the Islamic Center of Southern California in Los Angeles, Maher Hathout is fond of saying “I am not Sunni, I am not Shi’a, I am Sushi,” which is a joke about both California cuisine and the theological doctrine of *tawhid*. Despite this inclusive rhetoric, tensions survive in Los Angeles between Sunni, Shi’a, and African-American Muslims. In Manchester and Bradford, England, Barelwi and Deobandi Muslims have been unable to organize to demand accommodations from the host society. In Belfast, Ireland, Protestants and Catholics remain divided. Interfaith conflict is more obvious yet is less intense than intra-faith conflict. The closer co-religionists are the more significant the tensions can be.

## **Interfaith Youth Alliance – Advancing Democracy and Diversity**

The Fresno Interfaith Youth Alliance was formed in 2004 by a Palestinian-American community organizer and Methodist public high school Bible teacher in order to get kids off the streets on weekends doing community service projects. Soon after, Unitarians and Jews joined to help to combat proselytizing in public schools by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Walter Cronkite said that to maintain support for the 1960s values of the first amendment and valuing diversity, “we need the youth.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> KS interview, August, 2008.

If we are interested in preventing race or religious riots between citizens, then direct interactions with strangers is required. The involvement of young people and laypeople is vital. Ayah 5:48 in the Qur'an seems to promote productive competitions. Pluralism is a fact and we are free to work together as in ayah 49:13. The World Council of Churches writes: "Greater awareness of religious plurality has heightened the need for dialogue among people of different faiths."<sup>26</sup> Tariq Ramadan agrees that, "The need for interreligious dialogue is not doubted."<sup>27</sup> Lastly Diana Eck wrote in *A New Religious America*, "The interfaith agenda is now America's agenda."<sup>28</sup> Charts from Hartford and London (see Appendix A) show a rapid growth in interfaith activities in recent years. If this is the interfaith century, then we need to be human, hospitable, humble, organized, and active.

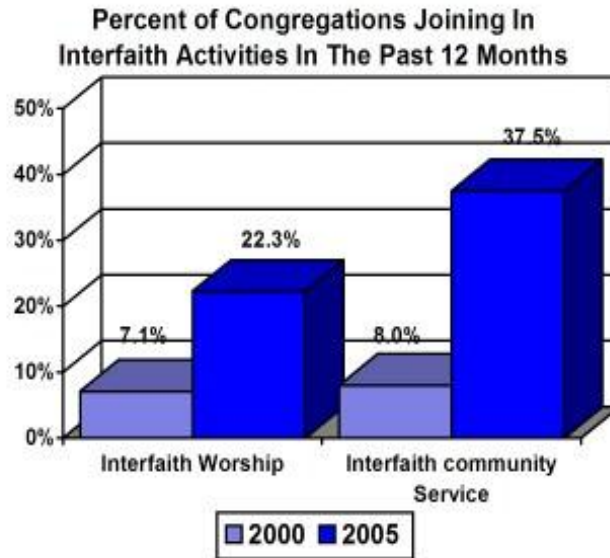
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<sup>26</sup> From World Council of Churches, "Taking stock of 30 years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 Guidelines," *Current Dialogue*, Issue 40, December, 2002. Available online at: <[www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd40-04.html](http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd40-04.html)>

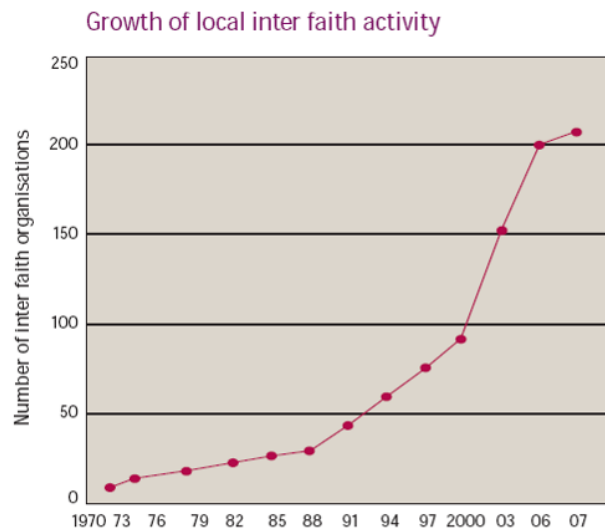
<sup>27</sup> Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 201.

<sup>28</sup> Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 370.

## Appendix A – Growth of Interfaith Activities in the U.S. and UK

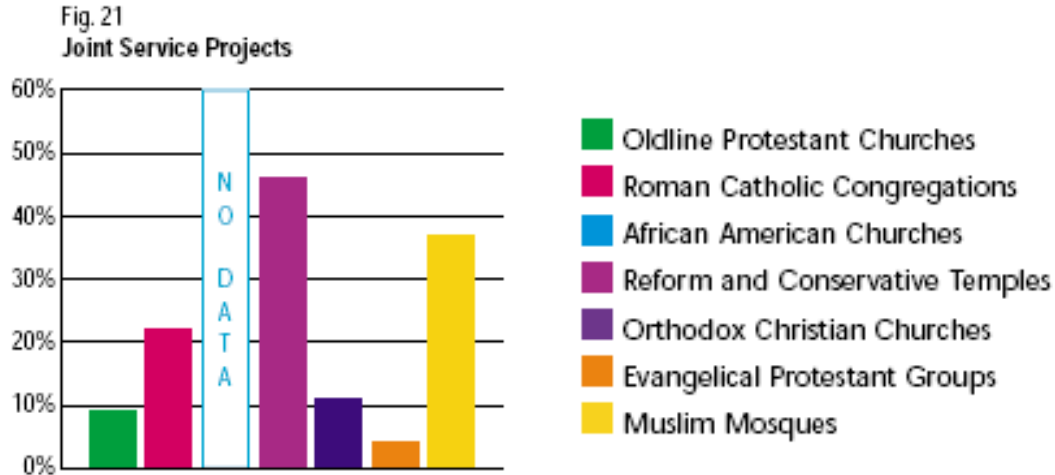


David A. Roozen, “Faith Communities Today: American Congregations 2005,” The Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2007. Available online at: <http://fact.hartsem.edu/American%20Congregations%202005%20pro.pdf>.



Inter Faith Network for the UK, “Annual Review, 2006-2007,” London, 2007. Available online at: [www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/annrev2007.pdf](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/annrev2007.pdf)

## Appendix B – Who Participates in Interfaith Activities?



David A. Roozen, “Interfaith FACTs: Meet Your Neighbors,” The Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2003. Available online at: <<http://fact.hartsem.edu/MeetNgbors1.pdf>>.

“Maybe you’re the sort of person who believes your religion to be true and any deviation from it to be false. You would rather not know about anyone else’s beliefs because they might weaken yours. If so, Partners in Dialogue is not for you.”

Jennifer Graham, *The State*, February 7, 1993, writing about a new interfaith group in Columbia, South Carolina. Quoted in Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, p. 370.

## Appendix C – A Sample Interfaith Activity

### The A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE Institute Workshop from the Anti-Defamation League

**Identity:** These activities provide participants with opportunities to examine their own identities and belief systems and to explore how their attitudes and behaviors are shaped by their backgrounds including their race<sup>1</sup>, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and other cultural and societal factors. In one such exercise, Four Questions, participants are asked to think about and discuss the following:

1. If I had to describe myself in terms of my heritage in four words I would say I am a:

\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.

2. One time that I was very aware that I was at least one of those words was:

\_\_\_\_\_.

3. One thing that makes me feel proud about being at least one of these four words is: \_\_\_\_\_.

4. One thing that is difficult or embarrassing about being one of these four words is: \_\_\_\_\_.

In small groups participants discuss the four questions while a facilitator creates a composite list of all responses from all participants to the first question. When the composite list of descriptors is written on chart paper, the facilitator selects several of the words and reads them aloud, one by one, inviting participants to stand as each word is called if the word applies to them. The composite list accomplishes a number of objectives. First, it reveals that there is diversity represented in the room, even in groups that, at first glance, appear to be homogeneous. In that way the exercise helps to define the word "diversity" broadly. In addition, seeing all the descriptors makes obvious the fact that there are a wide variety of words used to describe cultural identity groups. For example "Black" and "African American" are not the same, and it is important for to be sensitive to people's right to name themselves. Another important aspect of this exercise is that it provides an opportunity for participants to discuss feelings associated with being a member of a group that is part of the dominant culture in society and feelings associated with identifying oneself as a member of a subordinate or numerical minority group in society.

[Available online at: [www.adl.org/education/edu\\_awod/awod\\_framework.asp](http://www.adl.org/education/edu_awod/awod_framework.asp)]