

## ESSAY

## Interfaith Dialog: Motivation and Practice

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In a timely paper elsewhere in this issue of *JSC*, the authors of “The West and the Religious ‘Other’: Connecting with Muslims” discuss tensions that may exist between Muslims and Christians, or more generally between Muslims and non-Muslims. Partly in response to concerns about contemporary xenophobia and Islamophobia, the authors examine World Value Survey data to make a case that Muslims and Christians share a significant majority of the values measured by the survey. The authors end their paper suggesting that such shared values and norms might serve as a starting point for building interfaith connections and relationships. However, readers of their paper may wonder how to move from that starting point to actual engagement in interfaith dialog and relationship building. This essay is therefore intended to complement their paper by examining the importance of interfaith dialog and offering a number of practical ideas for engaging in dialog, ideas which draw on the experiences of bringing groups from the US to the Sultanate of Oman.

### Background

In 2002, Northwestern College (Iowa) began a collaborative effort with the Al Amana Centre in the Sultanate of Oman. What began with an exploratory trip to Oman funded by my college led to three short-term immersion experiences for students and two for staff and faculty. Eventually the collaboration led to the development of an ongoing semester long study abroad program for students at Northwestern or other colleges. The motivation for this collaboration was an effort by the administration of Northwestern College to encourage more international study trips for students led by faculty. My work to develop and lead trips specifically to Oman was based on a related desire to engage in intercultural interaction and also to participate in interfaith dialog, goals that aligned with those of the Al Amana Centre (<http://alamanacentre.org/>).

Located on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman is a particularly open and instructive country in which to engage in intercultural and interfaith dialog. It is a moderate Islamic state, and Omanis are well known for their hospitality and acceptance of others of different religious faiths. The majority of Omanis are Ibhadhi, as they have been historically, but Sunni and Shi’a Muslims are also present in Oman, and there are peaceful relations among all three groups.

Oman has also established legal religious freedom for people of all faiths. Public evangelism is not allowed for members of any faith, but the government has provided land for

worship sites for many religious groups, and does not restrict public worship services in these locations. Finally, Oman actively encourages interfaith dialog, frequently inviting international speakers to give public lectures at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. On two different student study trips, we were privileged to hear noted theologian Hans Kung speak at the mosque, the first time on an “Interfaith Global Ethic for Peace” and the second time on “The Three Abrahamic Religions and the Problem of Violence” (<https://tinyurl.com/y7z88a79>).

### **Motivation for Engaging in Dialog**

My desire to take students, staff, and faculty to Oman was motivated by my conviction that, in a rapidly globalizing world, interfaith dialog between Christians and Muslims is critically important. At present, about one half of the world’s population is either Muslim or Christian. The increasing density of connections between them through travel, trade, and communication means that what happens in one portion of the world will influence what happens in other parts of the globe; isolation from the “other” is no longer realistic. As the web of connections between societies grows more dense and complex, learning how to coexist peacefully is no longer optional for Christians and Muslims.

Engaging in such dialog helps to challenge the many negative and distorted images of Islam and Muslims that exist in the West. For example, the administration of Northwestern College, while wanting to sponsor more international study trips, was initially very reluctant to sanction my exploratory trip. The administrators were concerned about safety, assuming that any Islamic State would be dangerous and inherently hostile to Christians. Such concerns were no doubt exacerbated by the 9/11 attacks and the Bush administration’s efforts to start a war in Iraq. Thus, it took conversations between members of the administration and people who had experience living in Oman to convince college leaders that nations in the Gulf region were diverse, that Islam was not inherently a religion of violence, and that Oman was a country where visitors from the West would be safe and experience genuine hospitality and openness.

Nor was this the only or last time I had to respond to such concerns. Parents of students often had to be convinced that their daughter or son would be safe, and that the experience in Oman would be a valuable learning experience. These concerns were addressed through sharing first-hand stories of our group experiences in Oman. I talked about the hospitality we experienced. I spoke about the homes into which we were invited and the meals that we shared with Omani Muslims and expatriate Christians. And I shared about the freedom we had to have conversations about faith and to go to church and worship with other Christians. Our time in Oman thus accumulated firsthand narratives that could challenge assumptions and stereotypes about the Middle East and Islam.

Engaging in interfaith dialog also leads to a greater understanding of the historical context and issues that shape tensions between Christians and Muslims. On our trips, discussions about history helped us see that some current tensions may not be caused by

inherent religious differences, but are more likely rooted in colonialism, the sometimes problematic relationship between western missionaries and colonial powers, and related issues. The relevance of the historical context is more complex than can be addressed in this essay, but during our trip we were frequently challenged as we learned more about the historical legacy and its impact on relations among people of different faiths in Oman and the larger Gulf region.

Finally, it became clear on our trips that engaging in interfaith dialog could also lead to learning more about our own faith. As trip participants engaged in conversations with Muslims and experienced the warm hospitality of Omanis, their view of Muslims and Islam would begin to change as they re-thought aspects of their own faith. For example, if gracious hospitality is supposed to be a mark of the Christian faith, what did it mean to encounter the overwhelming hospitality of Omanis? Or if a personal sense of God's work in one's life is a mark of faith, what did it mean to hear testimonies from Muslims about their personal experience of the divine? Students frequently asked me such questions, and these questions always served as an opportunity to have meaningful conversations about faith with each other, and to push the understanding of our own faith to a deeper level.

### **Humility**

A motivation for engaging in interfaith dialog is important. But to facilitate the move from motivation to active engagement, our interfaith dialog drew on several practical principles. The first was to practice humility and take on the role of a guest and student very consciously. When a guest enters someone else's home, a good guest will tread lightly and show respect for the host. The guest does not set or dictate the agenda; being a guest is not a position of power. Likewise, taking on the role of a student is not a position of power, because it implicitly asks the other to become the teacher. The value of taking on that student role is that people are often willing to become "teachers" and share about their lives and their faith. Furthermore, as we take on the student role, those with whom we engage in conversation are more tolerant of questions or mistakes that are unintentionally offensive when they know that our underlying intention is to learn and understand. As guests and students in Oman, our goal was to listen, learn, and get to a place where those with whom we were talking could affirm our understanding of their faith and lives.

### **No Hidden Agenda**

Taking on the role of a student in our conversations required that we not have a hidden agenda. Our underlying goal for engaging in interfaith dialog could not be intention to convert the other to our own faith perspective. If we intended conversion to be the outcome of the conversation, then we would be assuming a position of power and would be less open to how the dialog might help us rethink our own faith, along with understanding other faiths. If the

underlying goal of our conversation was the conversion of the other, then we would be asserting explicitly that their faith was incorrect and ours was superior. At a deeper, more personal level, such an agenda might reflect an effort to affirm or strengthen our own faith by proving another faith wrong or inferior. Either way, entering a conversation with the underlying goal of converting the other would create a struggle for power in the conversation, and would have negative consequences for a growing friendship when people prove unwilling to convert.

Arguing that conversion cannot be an underlying or hidden agenda in interfaith dialog may not be a popular idea with all Christians, or for that matter, with all Muslims. Both faiths are noted for being exclusivistic and evangelistic faiths. Yet there remains a need for Christians and Muslims (and people of other faiths) to find a way to live together peacefully. It seems reasonable to replace a desire for converting the other with a goal of being a faithful witness of one's own religion, while at the same time honestly seeking to understand the other's religion. The desire to be a faithful witness not only means working towards mutual equality and integrity in the conversation, it also implies that all participants in the conversation are willing to trust that God will bring about any needed change; they do not need to rely on their own human efforts.

### **Acknowledging Differences**

While humility and avoiding a hidden agenda are important, the goal of our interfaith dialog was not to reduce or ignore those areas of our faith where we differed. Rather, the purpose of our dialog was mutual understanding without having to agree on all points. We did not seek the lowest common denominator or focus solely on points of agreement; we willingly acknowledged those areas where we differed. For example, Muslims typically do not accept the deity of Christ. Likewise, Christians typically will not agree that Mohammad is the final revelation of God. Acknowledging and understanding our differences was important precisely because it could make areas of agreement that much more meaningful. Moreover, a willingness to acknowledge those areas where we agreed and those areas where we differed meant that our conversations were marked by integrity as well as humility.

### **Working Together**

If our interfaith dialog is characterized by humility and integrity, we can add another principle to our practice of interfaith dialog. To understand this principle, it helps to imagine that we are sitting across the table from each other engaging in conversation. This image reflects our desire to engage as equals in productive and friendly conversation with each other. However, if we imagine that at times we are sitting on the same side of the table, this change in the image suggests that there may be areas or issues on which we can work together jointly.

For example, as we talked with Omanis, we often discovered a common interest in addressing local and global issues related to poverty, oppression, and injustice. These were

issues where we could express a common concern and think creatively about how we might work together to address them. In a similar way, as we talked with staff of the Al Amana Centre, we discovered that they had established a charity to assist needy expatriates. Although this charity was begun by Christian expatriates, Omani Muslims also saw the value of this charity and were frequent contributors. With this collaboration, people of two different faiths had come together in recognition of a common theme in their faiths, the call to love their neighbor. This collaboration is a practical example of what is advocated by the Common Word project, which makes the case that both Islam and Christianity motivate us to love our neighbor (<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1>). Thus, in our interfaith dialog it is possible to both acknowledge our differences and at the same time work together on common concerns. Both practices can enhance our interfaith dialog and our relationships with people of other faiths.

### **Sharing Meals**

The table talk image can lead us to a final practical principle for interfaith dialog. One common purpose for sharing a table is for sharing not just talk, but a meal. On a very significant level, the practice of breaking bread together and sharing a meal has a powerful influence on our conversation and on our relationships with those around the table. During our time in Oman, some of the very best conversations occurred when we shared coffee, tea, dates, halwa, or other food with Omanis and expatriates. Breaking bread together can strengthen friendships and increase our sense of being part of a larger more diverse community.

The principles for interfaith dialog listed above proved to be useful for our interfaith dialog in Oman. Our use of these ideas helped us to develop valuable relationships, engage in good conversations, and deepen our understanding of both Islamic and Christian faith. However, the principles that we endeavored to practice should be applicable for dialog with faiths other than Islam and in locations other than Oman. For example, some of the students who participated in an Oman trip have since used what they learned in Oman in working with Somalian Muslim refugees in Minneapolis. Thus, the ideas discussed above might serve as a useful beginning to engage in conversations and build relationships with neighbors who live down the street just as well as with those who live across the world.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

From the first trip to Oman in 2002, we have had unique opportunities to travel to a moderate Islamic state and engage in valuable intercultural and interfaith dialog. Formal and informal interactions with Omanis and expatriates have changed the way trip participants understand the Middle East and understand Islam. The trips have offered hope that Muslims and Christians can learn to live together peacefully in our increasingly globalized world. Certainly not everyone will have similar opportunities to travel, but the ideas that shaped our

intercultural and interfaith dialog might serve as a valuable starting point for others to begin a dialog with people of other faiths who live in their own communities.