

*“One Ark, One Humanity”*



# Inter-Religious Dialogue

*Guidelines and Resources*

*from*

**CLERGY BEYOND BORDERS**



Once we shared the same boat —  
Can we ride together now?



*“One Ark, One Humanity”*

# Inter-Religious Dialogue

## *Guidelines and Resources*

### **Religious Leaders for Reconciliation:**

Journeys amplifying voices for pluralism, confronting extremist trends

[www.ClergyBeyondBorders.org](http://www.ClergyBeyondBorders.org)

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# Clergy Beyond Borders

## Why are there so many spiritual paths?

Our nation has been grappling with issues surrounding religious diversity for some time. The tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, has brought this topic to the forefront once again. Religious leaders do not have the luxury of ignoring inter-religious issues today. But neither do other members of faith communities.

Clergy Beyond Borders (CBB) empowers people of faith – on both sides of the pulpit – to explore and utilize the resources of their diverse religious traditions to promote authentic dialogue, inter-religious understanding, and an American pluralism that goes beyond mere tolerance.

This booklet is designed to provide resources for those involved in inter-religious efforts – and we hope that means you! We introduce some of the sources of the misunderstandings and conflicts and provide resources for overcoming them. Although we focus here primarily on the three “Abrahamic” religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, we do not intend to imply a lack of love and respect for other spiritual paths. Future publications will embrace other traditions.

Please remember that no individual author can possibly represent the entire spectrum of belief of his or her tradition in such a brief fashion. For those who want to read more in depth, a bibliography is provided.

**This booklet is divided into three parts:**

- 1) Challenging questions asked about these three religions**
- 2) Personal spiritual statements**
- 3) Texts which explain the religious value of pluralism and diversity**

# Part I: Frequently Asked Questions

About Islam (by Imam Yahya M. Hendi)

## 1. What is Jihad?

The word ***Jihad*** comes from the Arabic root J-H-D, which carries the meaning “strive”. It could also mean “effort” or “labor”. The essential meaning of jihad is to strive to practice one’s faith in the face of obstacles. The translation of the word jihad as “holy war” is incorrect. The term “holy war” is not to be found in the Muslim scriptures. Pope Urban II coined the term to legitimate the Crusades against the people he called the “infidels”, meaning Muslims in this case. Jihad in Islam can refer to different forms of struggle such as 1) jihad by “tongue”, striving by language to resist evil; 2) jihad by the pen, striving against evil by means of writing; and 3) jihad of the soul, striving against internal temptations such as hate, envy, anger, etc.

Muslims believe that the internal moral struggle to overcome arrogance, jealousy, or selfishness, is often more rigorous than physical battle.

## 2. But What Does Islam Say About War and Suicide Bombing?

The Quranic term for war and fighting is ***Qital***. Qital is, however, seen as a war of self-defense, not an offensive war to force others to convert to Islam. Even during times when Muslims are engaged in battle, Islam requires following certain codes of ethics. These codes include giving diplomacy a chance before battle starts, as well as the following:

1. Not harming civilians, especially women and children.
2. Not destroying property including farms, trees, or animals.
3. Protecting all places of worship.
4. Treating all prisoners of war with dignity.
5. Allowing bodies of soldiers slain in battle to be buried.
6. Ending the battle when the enemy ceases hostilities and prefers peaceful means.

Within this context Islam emphasizes that suicide is a grave sin. Therefore, the terrorist acts of suicide bombers are neither condoned nor permitted by Islam.

### **3. Who is Allah?**

Allah is the Arabic word for God, and is related to the Hebrew words “El” or “Elohim.” In fact, Allah is the word or expression used by both Arab Jews and Christians to refer to the same God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Muslims prefer not to use the term “God” because it is not unique. In English the term can become gods, goddesses, “god-awful”, and many other usages. However, many do use the word “God” when writing or speaking in English.

### **4. What is Shariah? What role does it or should it play in U.S. law?**

Shariah is a complex system of ethical and moral paradigms to help derive teachings based on the Quran and the sayings and conduct of the Prophet Muhammad. The term “Shariah” literally means “the path to a watering hole.” The Shariah is not law per se, but rather a religious code for living, in the same way that the Bible offers a moral system for Christians. Shariah deals with many topics, including economics, politics, sexuality, hygiene, diet, prayers, and gender relations. Values that govern Shariah include justice, equality, equity, non-discrimination on account of religion, race, ethnicity, profession, or sex, and respect for the Earth. Shariah upholds many freedoms well known to Americans, including freedom of religion, of expression, of conscience, of self-defense, and freedom to earn a living.

Just as they do for Jewish law or Canon law, U.S. courts will consider relevant documents based on Shariah principles as long as they do not contradict our constitutional protections and public policy. This is only correct and just. For example, religious law can influence private agreements (such as marriage) and contracts in this country and abroad, some of which our legal system may be called upon to arbitrate. Thus, American courts consider foreign law or religious law, but only within the American constitutional structure. In the end, our Constitution is the law of the land. Therefore, current efforts to “outlaw” Shariah on the state level are misguided. In our existing legal system, it is impossible for Shariah to “trump” the U.S. legal system. Thus, we must ask, what is really behind these movements to “outlaw” Shariah law?

## **5. Do Muslims believe that they have to kill or convert non-Muslims?**

Islam is sometimes incorrectly portrayed as a religion of force. This is fundamentally contrary to the teachings of the faith and religion.

The Holy Quran, the Muslims' Holy Scripture, states: **“Let there be no compulsion in religion”** 2:256.

## **6. Are all Muslims Arabs?**

The term Arab refers either to a geographic region or to a language community. Most Muslims are not Arabs, nor do they speak Arabic as their mother tongue. There are 57 nations that have a significant Muslim population. Fewer than 15 percent of the world's Muslims are Arabs. Perhaps 15 percent of Arabic speakers are in fact Jews and Christians by religion. There are about 1.6 billion Muslims around the world and an estimated 8 million in the United States.

## **7. What is the status of women in Islam?**

Islam grants women a dignified and respectful position. Islam holds women in the highest esteem. According to the Islamic Holy Scriptures, women and men are created from the same essence – dust. “O humankind, honor your Lord who has created you from the same essence.” 4:1. Islam demands that husbands treat their wives with respect and loving-kindness. As revealed in the Quran, “Among God's wonders is that he created for you mates and partners that you may incline towards each other and engender love and kindness between you” 30:21. Islamic theology emphasizes that men and women are equal partners in the making of nations. “Believing men and women are the protectors of one another” (9:71). Finally, acquiring knowledge is an obligation upon every male and female.

## **About Christianity (by Rev. David Gray)**

### **1. Does the idea of the Trinity contradict the worship of one God?**

No. We worship one God whom we experience in three different ways. The people of God knew they were experiencing the divine in God

on the mountain, in Jesus, and in the Holy Spirit, but knew they were experiencing the one God in different ways. Christians believe there is one God who is both sovereign and majestic but also intimate and who cares about each of us. God is consistent, accessible and a connectational God. Thinking about the diversity of ways in which faithful people have experienced God over time and how God is connectational as the Trinity implies helps one be more open to the diversity of ways people in the world experience the sacred.

## **2. What do Christians mean by original sin and how is it understood for non-Christians?**

We know from our own experience and from looking at the newspaper and the world around us that we all do things that separate us from God. None of us by our nature on our own is able to avoid sin. Most Christians who believe in original sin believe that Christians and non-Christians all do things that separate them from God. None of us is perfect or deserving of God's salvation. All of us in the world are in need of God's grace.

## **3. What does the crucifixion/divinity of Christ mean for Christians and others?**

The death and resurrection of Christ mean that Jesus died in our place and rose to show that death does not have the final word. Jesus took upon himself the pain of an imperfect world. The divinity of Christ provides a model of life and values for Christians and non-Christians. It provides hope that God in love has provided an opportunity for God's creation to be with God after death.

## **4. Do Christians historically oppose Islam (e.g., the Crusades)?**

While Christians have not been perfect in their relationships with other faiths and in their evangelism, Christians believe we are all created in God's image and that God's love is broad. The vast majority of Christians seek to live in the world with, learn from, and grow along with Muslims and members of others faiths. My congregation has shared sacred space with a Jewish congregation since 1964 and hosts an annual worship service, spirituality groups and service projects with a

Muslim community as well. As members of Abrahamic faiths, Muslims and Christians have much in common as well as much to learn from each other.

## **5. How is the “new covenant” understood in dialogue with Jews and more generally, how is interfaith dialogue pursued if Jesus is understood as the only way to truth/salvation?**

God’s new covenant of grace does not negate the covenant God made with Israel and the special way God has worked through the Jewish people. We are all called to relationship, love, and dialogue with others who experience the sacred in different ways in God’s amazing world. Each faith has its own understanding of the sacred and of how God has revealed God’s self. Members of all faiths deepen their spirituality and understanding of the world through dialogue with members of other religions.

### **About Judaism (by Rabbi Gerald Serotta)**

#### **1. What does it mean to say that the Jews are the Chosen People?**

The Torah (Five Books of Moses) clearly indicates that as descendants of Abraham, the ancient Israelites and later the Jewish people have a distinct covenant with God and a distinct mission in history, namely to spread the knowledge of the one God and God’s ethical requirements. Later religious authorities taught that both Christianity and Islam were religions that worship the same God and were bound by God’s moral teaching. They therefore share Judaism’s role in spreading that knowledge and can also be seen as “chosen” in this sense.

#### **2. How does Judaism view the non-Jew?**

In theological terms, Judaism believes that “the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come,” i.e., ethical behavior is the route to eternal salvation without regard to religious identity. The Prophet Isaiah declared in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE that in the end of historic times all the nations would come and worship together. However, his vision does not imply they will become part of the Jewish people.



### **3. Do Jews seek or allow conversion to Judaism?**

Judaism permits conversion and there are Jews of every race. At a certain point in history, Jewish authorities deemphasized the spread of the knowledge of God through conversion in favor of the Jewish people being an exemplary nation (as a light for the nations, in the words of Isaiah). Nationhood or peoplehood remains an essential concept of Jewish identity. Jewish sacred history records that the people were formed in slavery conditions in Egypt, predating the reception of the Torah revelation during their subsequent journey to freedom. Therefore the decision to join the Jewish people (convert) is comparable to a process of mutual adoption into a family.

### **4. Why does the Torah seem to advocate genocide of non-Jewish nations?**

The nations which are condemned in the Torah were seen as truly depraved, worshipping idols and materialism, and offering human sacrifice. Facing this same question, the Rabbis of the Talmudic period (2,000 years ago) declared that from the time of Sennacherib (8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) there were no longer any purely evil tribes or nations. They therefore forbade genocide.

### **5. Isn't the Torah the source of Jewish law and authority?**

The Torah (known as the “written” law and considered of Divine origin) was from the beginning accompanied by a set of interpretations (“oral” law, also considered of Divine origin). This Oral Law is primarily contained within the Talmud, an extensive collection of stories and legal discussion finally compiled and edited in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. For example, one cannot understand the meaning of “an eye for an eye,” a law contained within the Torah, without recognizing that the Oral Law of the Talmud indicates its interpretation is “the value of an eye for an eye,” i.e., monetary compensation for the loss of an eye. So Torah and the rest of Holy Scriptures cannot be understood without reference to later Rabbinic Law, which reflects these oral traditions.

## **6. What does it mean to view the land of Israel as a “promised land” or “holy land”?**

While neither of these expressions is from the Torah, it is very clear that “The Land” is deeply central to Judaism. Abraham was commanded to leave his birthplace and travel there and the last four books of the Torah record the journey of the people to return to this specific place. The “holiness” of the land derives from the ecological principles and economic ethics required of inhabitants (Sabbatical and Jubilee Year --Leviticus 25). The relationship of the Jewish people to the land is conditional, and is theologically tied to the people’s observance of exemplary ethics (Leviticus 26). Given its unique character, the land can be made holy or defiled by its occupants.

## **Part II: Personal Statements**

**By Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin**, Vice-President of Clergy Beyond Borders and Director, Center on Religion, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University (previously printed in the *Huffington Post*)

It was three days before Rosh Hashanah, and I was predictably anxious about my identity, my life, about my family’s Jewish future. As a good and fractious Jew, I was somewhat ambivalent about which synagogue I would go to: The one I sometimes go to? The one I would never step foot in? The one that I really should create on my own, maybe?

This Rosh Hashanah was different for two reasons. My 87-year old mother, who lives alone 400 miles away in Boston, had pneumonia. So we were on our way to Boston, but I had to honor a commitment to my dear friend Yahya Hendi, who is an imam. He wanted the whole family, the whole world, it seems, but especially Jews and Christians, for an Iftar, a very sacred celebration as a part of Ramadan. He wanted us all to share in every aspect of the evening, and so made his backyard into a center of prayer and his house into a feast.

My son Isaac is so attached to baseball that he brings his glove and ball *everywhere*, just in case: you never know when you might meet another seven-year-old in search of round objects to bat, pound, throw and kick.

Sure enough, Imam Hendi's young son was outside pounding a soccer ball, furiously, back and forth, by himself! Ah, a delicious sight for my son, all the right signals of a fellow juvenile madman in motion, a mark of the truly committed, those who play even by themselves!

So Isaac lunged toward the boy, but what is this? A *soccer* ball?! Where is the baseball? And so I witnessed a moment of cultural crisis, that great Atlantic Ocean divide between the obsession with soccer and the obsession with baseball. Not to worry, I turned away for just a few minutes, and they were tossing the baseball. Peace on earth, goodwill toward mankind, Arab/Jewish conflict resolved, game, set, match.

Then something strange happened to my son. The crowds parted on the grass, the Muslims came to the center and lined up precisely, and Imam Hendi called his boy to the front. The imam then gave an impassioned speech on the intense love he felt for everyone there, for all Jews and all Christians, and on how indeed there was no proper way to be a Muslim other than through love.

My boy was watching all these men and women gather. Then Yahya's boy led the call to prayer, and my son's face was aglow with his beautiful eyes full of wonder. I stared at Isaac staring at Yahya's boy in reverence, and I, on the side, in the cool of the night, underneath brilliant stars, prayed that maybe we should just stay in that moment.

You see, Imam Hendi felt especially motivated to gather everyone because we were days away from the spectacle of an American Quran burning. He was on television, and I was being called for a television spot that night. So here we were, Yahya and a hundred guests, prayers and blessings, my girls and his girls, my boy and his boy, and also a world gone mad.

I noticed a change in Isaac after that night. He came to Synagogue with me, with the glove, as usual, but I caught him watching and listening intently to ceremony, mouthing many of the words he did not know yet. I saw him begin to explore his identity as a spiritual being.

I watched a second birth, the birth of a human being who seeks out what is beyond, at first through the worship practices of the fathers and the mothers, through the ceremonies of the ancients, through engaging

what has come before. For that second birth of my son, I have Imam Yahya Hendi to thank, a Palestinian who just buried his father back home in bad circumstances, who is fatherless now, just like me, trying to make the world safe for his beloved children. I see him there on the grass, hands raised, palms up, the stars blazing above, saying his ancient words, Allahu Akbar. I think to myself, yes, sometimes God is great, when we find the Divine Presence in the eyes of strangers, and in the loving words of long lost cousins. And I think that this year I inaugurated my Isaac on a good journey.

**By Rev. David Gray, Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church,  
CBB Board of Religious Advisors (Previously printed in  
Washington Post Blog On Religion and Common Ground  
News)**

One of the great fears that parents and church leaders have about their youth engaging in interfaith dialogue is that they will lose their connection to their own religion and will end up rejecting and leaving their faith, maybe even converting to another religion as a result. My experience as a Christian pastor has been just the opposite –I have watched young people become stronger in their own faith through exposure to other traditions.

Personal relationships matter a great deal in influencing how individuals come to faith, switch faiths or grow in faith. Most of us are part of the tradition of our parents and stay in a tradition that comes to us through the personal relationships in our home and our place of worship. High school students often deepen their faith because of a role model. College students often grow in faith because a person of faith was there for them during a time of pain. Young adults often stay with their faith because someone they admire is in the faith.

In encouraging people to stay in their faith, actions speak louder than words. St. Francis of Assisi once said, “Preach always, use words if necessary” to convey the concept that we share our faith by what we do as well as by what we say. As a pastor I try to live the Gospel of Christ, who modeled how we are to live by his actions as well as by his words.

Regardless of our tradition, the everyday personal interactions of people of faith have a great impact on others staying in their traditions.

When young people begin to look beyond their faith background to engage people of different faiths, personal interactions often cause them to consider their own tradition as never before. If we grow up in a world where everyone is similar, we too often think about faith in cultural terms without analyzing the doctrine itself. Interacting with people who are different can cause us to think more deeply about how our own identity is shaped and developed .

One of the benefits of interfaith dialogue is that in order to explain our faith to others we must come to terms with what we actually believe, and that often brings us to a deeper place in our own faith. To explain one's own faith requires synthesizing those parts of the faith that one believes in.

For example, Farah is a Sunni Muslim girl from rural Ohio. She attends a high school outside of Cleveland and is one of the few Muslims at her school. She is often asked what it is like being a Muslim. She says that in the process of engaging with non-Muslims and explaining her faith she has come to experience a deepening of her belief through her own reflection.

Sometimes conversations can cause people to develop a pride in their background that they did not have before. In college, I found that being one of a few from my region of the country meant that people often asked me what it was like to grow up there. I had assumed while growing up that everyone was like me. When I encountered people who were very different I began to think about my community in a new way. I developed a sense of pride. I saw myself as a representative of my state and region and it increased my feelings about, and loyalty to, my community. When we are engaged in conversation with people from others faiths we learn about ourselves and clarify our beliefs as we explain our religion and often we develop a sense of pride as a result.

A recent study by researchers in California and Canada found that older siblings often do better in school than younger ones because they end up tutoring their younger siblings. The process of tutoring helps the older students learn because they have to explain information to

the younger ones. The researchers concluded that the key driver of success for those older students was the premise that humans learn by explaining.

I have seen, through interfaith dialogue, that young people of many traditions who once did not care much about their religion before the dialogue, suddenly become inspired by the commitments of others to return to the faith of their roots.

If parents and religious leaders want their young people to develop a faith that is deep in their tradition and broad in the world, they should encourage, not discourage, interfaith interactions. Faith that is tested, contrasted and explained is faith that is most likely to be internalized and to endure.

**By Imam Yahya Hendi, President CBB, Muslim Chaplain at Georgetown University**

*“We fear what we do not know.”* This statement is attributed to Ali bin Abi Talib, the fourth caliph of Islam. Unfortunately after 1400 years, it still applies in far too many places. As a result of modern technology and means of communication, contacts between the inhabitants of the world have never been as close as they are today, yet ancient suspicions still live on.

Islam recognizes Abraham as “a man of truth” and as a prophet. Muslims respect his legacy and see him as a role model of true faith and monotheism. He and other prophets preached the same truth: “Worship none but God the Almighty.” In fact Muslims believe that Islam was not founded by Muhammad. Rather it was established by Abraham, the true submitter (literally “Muslim”) to the will of God. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Both Moses and Jesus came from the lineage of Isaac while Muhammad came from the lineage of Ishmael. Therefore, Muslims believe that they are members of one family of the covenant, *Ahlu-Al-Dhimmah*, together with Jews and Christians.

Islam also calls Jews and Christians *Ahlul-Kitab*, the people of the book. They are the followers of revelations that came down from God

through both Moses and Jesus, the Torah and the Gospels. Muslims are taught to speak respectfully of Jews and Christians and to stand in their defense. Islam teaches that some Jews and Christians were ungrateful to God and to their respective prophets, and disrespected their own scriptures. Hence the Quran warns Muslims against doing the same.

Many of the problems we face today derive from how some followers of the three religions misinterpret their religions. Islam teaches that it is God who judges people's beliefs and practices and not other human beings. Hence, Muslims are commanded to tolerate, respect, and dialogue with Jews and Christians.

Inspired by their faith, Muslims must share the responsibility for the pursuit of peace and reconciliation. The Quran makes it clear to Muslims that the struggle against injustice and oppression is a universal struggle in which Muslims are called to join others, among whom are Christians and Jews.

Creating peace between nations and establishing justice is, indeed, the work of God-conscious individuals. Working for peace is the very work of God. Those created in the image of God can better do God's work by improving the prospect for durable peace in a way that will affirm and uphold the right to life of every human being in the face of lawless violence. The Quran makes it very clear that ***"He who kills one person, it would be as if he killed all humanity."*** Hence this verse must become the banner we all hold up and strive for if we are sincere in worshipping God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and flesh.

Whenever Muhammad had an option between two courses of action, he always chose the non-confrontational one. Non-confrontational work for justice is the best of all deeds as the Quran puts it: ***"Stand out firmly for justice even if it were against yourselves"*** Quran 4:127.

In the midst of unrest, God calls on us to reaffirm the bond between all people of different faiths, nationalities, and ethnicities across the globe. According to the Muslim Holy Quran, God declares: ***"O people! I created you from a single pair of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may come to know one another and not that you may despise each other. The best amongst you is he/she who is a doer of good."*** Quran 49:13.

## **Part III. Understanding and Celebrating Religious Diversity and Pluralism**

*(Based in part on “Variety as Virtue” by Virginia A. Spatz, ClergyBeyond Borders.wordpress.com)*

Diversity is a value with which God chose to imbue the world.

For those who believe that human beings are created in the image of God or reflect God’s nature, then diversity is an essential representation of God’s nature. Let us look at some of the ways that the three Abrahamic traditions approach human and spiritual diversity:

### **Diversity of Communities**

An oft-quoted verse of the Quran (5:48) declares that diversity is a fundamental choice of God:

“Unto every one of you have we appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.”

In an article entitled “Living Together: Shared Space,” CBB International Advisory Board member Imam Dr. Abduljalil Sajid of Brighton, England, cites this verse among others, to suggest that Islam has a pluralistic vision which is sometimes overlooked:

“The Holy Quran not only conveys a message of peace, respect, tolerance, justice, freedom, and compassion; it provides mankind with a global framework for co-operation and a charter for inter-faith dialogue. It repeatedly stresses that all peoples on earth have had their prophets and messengers, and that multiplicity of every kind — religious, cultural, or ethnic — is part of God’s magnificent design: ‘And among His wonders is...the diversity of your tongues and colors’(Quran 30: 22)...”



“This means that prophetic guidance is not limited to any one community, period, or civilization. So Muslims — if they are true to their faith — do not claim a monopoly on the truth, or a monopoly on revelation...”

One Jewish textual response to the question of whether God desired pluralism can be gleaned from the story of the Tower of Babel:

“All the earth had the same language and the same words ... They gathered in the land of Shinar and said, ‘Come, let us build a city with a tower that reaches the sky, so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over all the earth!’

But God decides to confound their language and their plan: “‘Let us go down there and confuse their speech, so that no one understands what the other is saying.’ So it came about that the Eternal scattered them over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.” (Genesis 11:7–9).

The creators of the tower sought to eliminate the boundary between heaven and earth that God established during creation. They were also, according to later Rabbinic commentators, bloodthirsty and greedy. They sought to storm the heavens (Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 109a), and were callous toward human life, ignoring the death of tower builders who fell during construction, but mourning greatly whenever a brick was dropped (*Midrash Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 24).

By confounding their common language, God punished their hubris and greed and eliminated their chance of success. Apparently God had no choice but to divide human beings into different groups with particular languages, cultures, and ways of life. But we can see a plurality of language and culture not as a punishment but as a blessing. It is an affirmation of diversity and a response to destructive imperialist ambitions. A variety of languages gives rise to a variety of cultures and ways of life.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it, “Religion is the translation of God into a particular language and thus into the life of a group, a nation, a community of faith. In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims.” By creating different languages,

God created and sanctified cultural and religious pluralism. Just as our language conveys thoughts and truths that cannot be captured in another, so each faith communicates and embodies unique traditions. Particularity does not imply superiority. Rather, it reflects our global world of enduring and enriching diversity (Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*).

In this view, diversity of religious expression is not an accident to be tolerated -- or corrected -- but a value with which God chose to imbue the world, one we are to protect and cherish.

## **Diversity in Hospitality**

In September of 2010, the Mennonite Central Committee of the United States issued an open pastoral letter asking Mennonites and related Christian communities to focus on hospitality, concluding:

The Bible tells us to extend hospitality (Hebrews 13:1-2; 1 Peter 4:8-10). Sharing in meals and conversation can be a radical act, and a powerful counteraction to violence. Let us follow Jesus by showing hospitality to neighbors near and far.

The verses from Hebrews stress that hospitality should be offered to diverse individuals: “Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The verses from I Peter insist on diversity from the one offering hospitality, focusing on each giver’s particular gifts: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” -- I Peter 4:8-10

Another passage in the New Testament elaborates on the idea of different gifts: “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.” – Romans 12:4-6

In this view, diversity is an essential representation of God’s multi-faceted nature, as well as a requirement for a functional community.

Diversity -- in intention, in hospitality, and in communities’ religious expression -- is celebrated in Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

The Quran (5:38) says that, in the end, “[God] will make you truly understand” apparent differences. In the meantime we also recognize and yearn for some kind of unity and community, even where divisiveness seems to be the human condition. However, as Imam Sajid writes, “True global cooperation will not be possible until we recover an awareness of the ecumenical, ecological and ethical principles that are at the heart of every spiritual tradition.”

### *A Note About Understanding Sacred Texts Across Boundaries*

Many times we hear the scriptures of our own and other faiths quoted out of context. When approaching any sacred text – from our own traditions or from others – it is crucial to differentiate between a text’s original, historical context and within faith life today. It is also essential to consider the various ways any text has been understood through the centuries and how it is taught today.

The following guiding questions are based on those used by the Building Abrahamic Partnerships program at Hartford Seminary.

- What was the historical context for this particular text when it was first recorded or taught, and how do you think those who first read or heard it understood it?
- How do various contemporary denominations understand the text? How is it put into practice, if at all? How does it inform the world-view of members of different communities within its tradition?
- How do you think this text functioned during the centuries since it was written down, both internally (within its own faith community) and externally (in relations with other faith communities)?

- How do you understand this text today? How does it affect you personally?
- How can this text be interpreted in the context of Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations today, in order to forge better relations among adherents of these three faiths?
- How can this text be interpreted in the context of U.S. diversity of belief and practice, in order to build better relations more widely?

***What is Pluralism?*** (by Rev. Dr. Diana Eck from the website of the Pluralism Project, Harvard University)

The plurality of religious traditions and cultures has come to characterize every part of the world today. But what is pluralism? Here are four points to begin our thinking:

- First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.
- Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

- Third, pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.
- Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the “table” will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table -- with one’s commitments.

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Anita Diamant, **Living a Jewish Life**: Jewish practices with perspectives from all of the modern “movements.”

Hayim Halevy Donin, **To Be a Jew**: Orthodox Jewish belief and practice.

Reuven Firestone, **Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims**.

Arthur Hertzberg, **Judaism**: Theology and practice based directly on texts from classical sources.

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Milton Steinberg, **Basic Judaism**: A concise discussion of Jewish belief, presenting traditional and modern perspectives on Torah, theology, Jewish practice and law.

Adin Steinsaltz, **The Essential Talmud**: An overview of the Talmud, discussing its history, structure, content, and methodology. Summaries of significant Jewish law on matters like prayer, holidays, ritual, family, civil and criminal law, ethics, and mysticism.

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# Clergy Beyond Borders

Clergy Beyond Borders is dedicated to an active religious pluralism that goes beyond mere tolerance for difference. The basic premise of CBB's work is the conviction that all religions contain a message of commitment to improving the world, and that too often the differences rather than the commonalities become the subject for discussion. CBB promotes mutual recognition among religious communities, seeking not to remove meaningful borders between them, but rather to build bridges of understanding and cooperation.

At present, however, religious and cultural pluralism in the United States is facing a critical challenge. Fear of the other, already heightened in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, has been exacerbated by events of the last decade, including disputes over the rights of undocumented immigrants and the increased presence of religious minorities.

This situation, however, is not solely a concern for religious minorities or for those who favor inter-religious understanding. It epitomizes the on-going struggle to realize the United States' aspirations and founding principles of pluralism and tolerance in the face of lingering nativism, racism, and other forms of bigotry. Historically minorities, including Catholics and Evangelical Protestants, have also been victimized. We have not confronted such a concerted threat for many years. This development is also harming inter-religious understanding worldwide.

Representatives of CBB have visited countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, as part of an effort to empower religious leaders to use the resources of their own traditions to counter bigotry, injustice, and violence. CBB plans further international Journeys of Reconciliation as circumstances permit, presenting a model and an example based on the ideals, aspirations, and actual experience within the American context of religious diversity and cooperation.

# A Message from the President

## Imam Yahya Hendi

If we were truly Abraham's children we would do the work of Abraham. Each community has a direction to which it turns. However, in any direction and on every path upon which we walk we can compete with one another in doing peacebuilding around the world. We all pray that God will bless the nations of the world through the descendants of Abraham.

Is it possible for the children of Abraham to coexist peacefully? In his visit to Jerusalem, Pope John Paul II prayed: *“God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer. And asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant.”*

As one family with different brothers and sisters and the common ground of this one threatened Earth that we all share, we have and we will overcome all barriers and march together. Let our struggle be one to increase education and sustain inclusiveness. We affirm the rights embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaiming that all human beings are born equal in dignity and that the recognition of this inherent dignity leads to equal and inalienable rights for all members of the human family. This affirmation is the foundation for freedom, justice, and peace in the world.



- Conflict Resolution
- Education and Training
- Empowering Voices for Justice

In September, 2011, CBB sponsored its first Clergy Caravan of Reconciliation, a journey of religious leaders through eleven states to teach an expanded version of this booklet.

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