

EMBRACING INTERFAITH COOPERATION

Eboo Patel
on Coming Together to Change the World

A 5-SESSION STUDY BY EBOO PATEL WITH TIM SCORER

© Copyright 2012 Tim Scorer.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. *Embracing Interfaith Cooperation* is copyrighted material. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*. © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Morehouse Education Resources,
a division of Church Publishing Incorporated
Editorial Offices: 600 Grant Street, Suite 630, Denver, CO 80203

For catalogs and orders call:
1-800-672-1789
www.MorehouseEducation.org

Photos on pages 10, 28, 44, 58 and 74 courtesy of istockphotography.com. Used by permission.

Cover photo by Chris Popio © Copyright 2012 by Interfaith Youth Core. All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-1-60674-119-1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Quick Guide to the Handbook	4
Beyond the “Quick Guide”	5
Pointers on Facilitation	9
Session 1: Interfaith Cooperation in American History	11
Session 2: Interfaith Literacy	29
Session 3: The Science of Interfaith Cooperation	45
Session 4: The Art of Interfaith Leadership	59
Session 5: The Role of Colleges, Seminaries, and Houses of Worship	75

QUICK GUIDE TO THIS HANDBOOK

TEN things to know as you begin to work with this resource:

1. HANDBOOK + WORKBOOK

This handbook is a guide to the group process as well as a workbook for everyone in the group.

2. A FIVE-SESSION RESOURCE

Each of the five sessions presents a distinct topic for focused group study and conversation.

3. A RESOURCE FOR MULTI-RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

The value of this resource would be fully realized if the group using it was to be comprised of people of many faith traditions just like the one in the DVD presentation.

4. DVD-BASED RESOURCE

The teaching content in each session comes in the form of input by Eboo Patel and response by members of a small group on a DVD recording with segments of just over 30 minutes in length.

5. EVERYONE GETS EVERYTHING

This handbook addresses everyone in the group, not one group leader. There is no separate “Leader’s Guide.”

6. GROUP FACILITATION

The creators of this resource assume that someone will be designated as group facilitator for each session. You may choose the same person or a different person for each of the five sessions.

7. TIME FLEXIBILITY

Each of the five sessions is flexible and can be between one hour and two or more hours in length: however, if you intend to cover all the material presented, you will need the full two hours.

8. BUILD YOUR OWN SESSION

Prior to the session it is advisable for one or more members of the group to determine what to include in the group meeting time. In some cases the session outline presents options from which you can choose. In other cases the material is organized as a progression through the three or four main topics presented by Eboo Patel.

9. WITHIN EACH TOPIC IN A SESSION

Each segment in a session features a mix of input from Eboo Patel and the other members of the small group in the video, plus questions for discussion or other creative activities to guide individual and group reflection.

10. BEFORE THE SESSION, CLOSING THE SESSION AND AFTER THE SESSION

Each session opens with five activities for participants to consider as preparation for the session, closes with a blessing from one of the faith traditions that is named in the video conversation, and ends with one reflective activity as a suggestion for ongoing engagement with the topic of the session.

BEYOND THE “QUICK GUIDE”

Helpful information and guidance for anyone using this resource:

1. HANDBOOK + WORKBOOK

This handbook is a guide to the group process as well as a workbook for everyone in the group.

- We hope the handbook gives you all the information you need to feel confident in shaping the program to work for you and your fellow group members.
- The workspace provided in the handbook encourages you...
 - to respond to leading questions.
 - to write or draw your own reflections.
 - to note the helpful responses of other group members.

2. FIVE-SESSION RESOURCE

This resource presents Eboo Patel’s insights on Interfaith Cooperation framed as five distinct topics of study:

1. Interfaith Cooperation in American History
2. Interfaith Literacy
3. The Science of Interfaith Cooperation
4. The Art of Interfaith Leadership
5. The Role of Colleges, Seminaries and Houses of Worship

3. A RESOURCE FOR MULTI-RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

The value of this resource would be fully realized if the group using it was to be comprised of people of many faith traditions just like the one in the DVD presentation.

In creating this small group study resource, we set out to model a process of learning in the context of a truly multi-faith group. As you watch the DVD presentation you will meet a group that is comprised of a Jew, two Muslims, a spiritual seeker with Jain and Hindu roots, two Episcopal Christians and one Evangelical Christian who is working in the Lutheran Church.

Our challenge to you is to create your own group of religious diversity so that this study experience becomes much more than a group of Christians talking about interfaith possibilities:

- We want you to go beyond talking about something to actually experiencing it.
- We hope that you might be able to recruit a study group comprised of people from a wide variety of religious traditions and narratives.
- This study will mean so much more to you if you are able to bring together a group that is at least 50% non-Christian.

We recognize that for some of you even the task of reaching out and finding people of other faiths to participate in this study will be a new challenge and major learning experience, so here are some ways that you might begin to go about that:

- Seek out your local multi-faith or interfaith society/organization and introduce this study opportunity, inviting member organizations to advertise the program in their own faith communities.
- Contact your nearest seminary or theological school and ask to speak with the faculty member who has the most to do with

interfaith collaboration. Seek guidance from that person as to ways to go about making contact with the kind of people in other faith traditions who are ready for an experience of interfaith exploration.

- Because Eboo Patel is a prominent leader amongst American Muslims as well as in the American interfaith community, there is a special opportunity to reach out to Muslims in your community and inform them of this learning project and of your interest in involving local Muslims in the life of the learning group. You might even approach the leader of a mosque with the possibility of co-sponsoring the program, holding some sessions in your church and some in their mosque.
- Contact one of the synagogues close to you—you may already know of one that is particularly sympathetic to Jewish-Christian dialogue—and ask the rabbi if it would be possible to promote this learning opportunity in their community. Ideally, the rabbi would help you in the process of presenting the opportunity to members of the synagogue.
- Contact local media—a newspaper, a radio station, TV channel—and ask to talk about this program, using the opportunity to issue an invitation to people of other faith traditions to contact you if they are interested in knowing more about it.
- Use electronic media as well. That's how you will reach a younger demographic. Ask media-savvy people in your congregation about the best ways to go about Facebook, Twitter and YouTube outreach.

Remember: this program is more than an opportunity to talk about interfaith cooperation; it's an invitation to live it!

If You Are a Group of Diverse Religious Background...

Included in each session is a box just like this one where there are reflective questions for use by groups of mixed-faith background. These questions provide conversational openings into deepening relationship for people of different religions.

4. DVD-BASED RESOURCE

The teaching content in each session comes in the form of input by Eboo Patel and response by members of a small group, just over 30 minutes in length.

Eboo Patel's focused presentations and accessible academic authority stimulates thoughtful and heartfelt conversation among his listeners.

The edited conversations present group sharing that builds on Patel's initial teaching. They are intended to present to you a model of small group interaction that is personal, respectful and engaged.

You will notice that the participants in the DVD group also become our teachers. In many cases, quotes from the group members enrich the teaching component of this resource. This will also happen in your group—you will become teachers for one another.

We hope that the DVD presentations spark conversations about those things that matter most to those who are advancing the enterprise of interfaith cooperation in the 21st Century.

5. EVERYONE GETS EVERYTHING

The handbook addresses everyone in the group, not one group leader. There is no separate “Leader’s Guide.”

Unlike many small-group resources, this one makes no distinction between material for the group facilitator and for the participants. Everyone has it all! We believe this empowers you and your fellow group members to share creatively in the leadership.

6. GROUP FACILITATION

We designed this for you to designate a group facilitator for each session. It does not have to be the same person for all five sessions, because everyone has all the material. It is, however, essential that you and the other group members are clear about who is facilitating each session. One or two people still have to be responsible for these kinds of things:

- making arrangements for the meeting space (see notes on Meeting Space, p. 9)
- setting up the space to be conducive to conversations in a diverse small group community
- creating and leading an opening to the session (see notes on Opening, p. 9)
- helping the group decide on which elements of the guide to focus on in that session
- facilitating the group conversation for that session
- keeping track of the time
- calling the group members to attend to the standards established for the group life (see notes on Group Standards, p. 9)
- creating space in the conversation for all to participate
- keeping the conversation moving along so that the group covers all that it set out to do

- ensuring that time is taken for a satisfying closing to the session
- making sure that everyone is clear about date, location and focus for the next session
- following up with people who missed the session

7. TIME FLEXIBILITY

Each of the five sessions is flexible and can be between one hour and two or more hours in length: however, if you intend to cover all the material presented, you will need the full two hours.

We designed this resource for your group to tailor it to fit the space available in the life of the congregation or community using it. That might be Sunday morning for an hour before or after worship, two hours on a weekday evening, or 90 minutes on a weekday morning.

Some groups might decide to spend two sessions on one of the five major topics. There’s enough material in each of the five outlines to do that. Rushing to get through more than the time comfortably allows results in people not having the opportunity to speak about the things that matter to them.

8. BUILD YOUR OWN SESSION

Prior to the session, it is advisable for one or more members of the group to determine what to include in the group meeting time. In some cases the session outline presents options from which you can choose. In other cases the material is organized as a progression through the three or four main topics presented by Eboo Patel.

- One or two people might take on the responsibility of shaping the session based on what they think will appeal to the group members. This responsibility could be shared from week to week.
- The group might take time at the end of one session to look ahead and decide on what they will cover in the next session. In the interest of time, it might be best to assign this planning to a couple of members of the group.
- You might decide to do your personal preparation for the session (the five activities in “Before the Session”), and when everyone comes together for the session, proceed on the basis of what topics interested people the most.

9. WITHIN EACH TOPIC IN A SESSION

Each segment in a session features a mix of input from Eboo Patel and the other members of the small group in the video, plus questions for discussion or other creative activities to guide individual and group reflection.

You will recognize that the activities and topics in the study guide emerge both from the structured teaching of Eboo Patel as well as the informal and spontaneous conversation of the group members. This parallels the process of your group, which will be initially led by the content of the DVD and the study guide, but then branch off in directions that emerge spontaneously from the particular life of your group.

10. BEFORE THE SESSION, CLOSING THE SESSION, AND AFTER THE SESSION

Each session opens with five activities for participants to consider as preparation for the session, closes with a blessing from one of the faith traditions that is named in the video conversation and ends with one reflective activity as a suggestion for ongoing engagement with the topic of the session.

- Each session opens with five activities for participants to consider as preparation for the session. We intend these activities to open in you some aspect of the topic being considered in the upcoming session. This may lead you to feel more confident when addressing the issue in the group.
- Each session has a final reflective option for participants to take from the session and use as an extension of their learning. These offer a disciplined way for each participant to continue to harvest the riches of the group conversation.
- Each session closes with a blessing from a faith tradition: Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish and Christian, and Muslim. Another aspect of closing is *evaluation*. This is not included in an intentional way in the design of the sessions; however, evaluation is such a natural and satisfying thing to do that it could be included as part of the discipline of closing each session. It’s as simple as taking time to respond to these questions:
 - What insights am I taking from this session?
 - What contributed to my learning?
 - What will I do differently as a result of my being here today?

POINTERS ON FACILITATION

1. MEETING SPACE

- Take time to prepare the space for the group. When people come into a space that has been prepared for them, they trust the hospitality, resulting in a willingness to bring the fullness of them into the conversation. Something as simple as playing recorded music as people arrive will contribute to this sense of “a space prepared for you.”
- Think about how the space will encourage a spirit of reverence, intimacy and care. Will there be a table in the center of the circle where a candle can be lit each time the group meets? Is there room for other symbols that emerge from the group’s life?

2. OPENING

- In the opening session, take time to go around the circle and introduce yourselves in some way.
- Every time a group comes together again, it takes each member time to feel fully included. Some take longer than others. An important function of facilitation is to help this happen with ease, so people find themselves participating fully in the conversation as soon as possible. We designed these sessions with this in mind. Encouraging people to share in the activity proposed under *Group Life* is one way of supporting that feeling of inclusion.
- The ritual of opening might include the lighting of a candle, an opening prayer, the singing of a hymn where appropriate, and the naming of each person present.

3. GROUP STANDARDS

- There are basic standards in the life of a group that are helpful to name when a new group begins. Once they are named, you can always come back to them as a point of reference if necessary. Here are two basics:
 - Everything that is said in this group remains in the group. (*confidentiality*)
 - We will begin and end at the time agreed. (*punctuality*)
- Are there any others that you need to name as you begin? Sometimes standards emerge from the life of the group and need to be named when they become evident, otherwise they are just assumed.

We the People

insure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, and our Posterity, We ordain and establish this Constitution

Article 1

[The remainder of the document is heavily blurred and illegible.]

SESSION | 1

INTERFAITH COOPERATION IN AMERICAN HISTORY

BEFORE THE SESSION

Many participants like to come to the group conversation after considering individually some of the issues that will be raised. The following five reflective activities are intended to open your minds, memories and emotions regarding some aspects of this session's topic. Use the space provided here to note your reflections.

1. Turn to the part of Session 1 entitled *Essential: A Founding Dream* (pp. 14-15) and read the 10 statements that are taken from Eboo Patel's opening presentation, which you will hear in the first group session. Reflect on those, knowing that they are the foundation from which Eboo lives, teaches and acts.

2. Be attentive to the news as presented in various media this week, watching for places where interfaith relationships are featured. To what extent does what you are noticing match Eboo's 10 opening statements?

GROUP LIFE

The theme of this series is *Embracing Interfaith Cooperation*. You have come together as a group, ready to uncover some responses to this question: What does interfaith cooperation look like for us as a people of faith in this second decade of the 21st Century?

This is a new group, meeting for the first time. It may be that there are people of diverse religious traditions in the group. Take a few minutes to introduce yourselves in two ways:

- by telling your name
- by introducing yourself in the context of the religious tradition(s) that is/are part of your life

In August of 2012, another group met in Chicago to learn with Eboo Patel and to grapple with the same issues that are on your agenda for these five sessions. They will introduce themselves in the same way that you have just done.



Play the first section of the DVD for Session 1, up until Eboo begins to make his presentation.

Moving from left to right they are Caryn Fields, Maham Khan, Ian Hallas, Nick Price, Gautam Srikishan and Vicki Garvey.

ESSENTIAL: A FOUNDING DREAM



Play the second section of the DVD for Session 1, through Eboo's talk (about the next 12 minutes).

Eboo takes 12 minutes to paint an appealing picture of the way he sees the history and identity of the United States as a country founded in the values of a deep respect for religious diversity. He is clear, articulate and specific about his vision of the way things have been and the way they are.

Here are 10 statements that he makes during his presentation. The 10 together add up to the promise that Eboo sees in the American dream of pluralism. Go around the circle of your group and have people take turns in reading them aloud. As you do this, notice:

- when you are surprised by something new
 - when you are inspired or moved
 - when you have questions or wonderings
1. America is an immigrant nation. People from all over the world have come to the United States and established their families, their businesses and their cultural practices. That's how America was built.
 2. You can have a big dream in America either for the kind of person you want to be, the kind of business you want to build, the kind of cultural practice or artistic endeavor you want to establish.
 3. You can come to the United States and you can have freedom of conscience. You can establish your places of worship. You can pray the way you feel called by God or your consciousness.
 4. Interfaith cooperation is also at the heart of the American tradition. People of diverse religious background have established themselves here in equal dignity and mutual loyalty—that is, religious pluralism.
 5. People of diverse religious background who come to the United States get to continue to be followers of their religion at the same time as they are American. That hyphen between Jewish and American isn't a barrier; it's a bridge. What makes you a better Jew also makes you a better American.
 6. For centuries political philosophers believed that the only way you could have diversity in a society was under dictatorship or empire. If you had a democracy, a place where people participated in civic life and where people voted for their leaders, everybody had to have the same religious identity. The exception was the United States. We are the first nation to embrace this notion that people from the four corners of the earth could come together and build a country. That was in the late 18th century. We are now looking at a world where many nations do this.
 7. If you look back through American history you see multiple times along the course of the last two centuries when heroes have lived out this American tradition of religious pluralism.

8. That's the genius of the beginning of the United States. Now, as societies around the world are becoming more diverse, it has to be the genius of those societies as well. They have wonderful stories too. As they have become more diverse, these societies have realized that they too have to be countries in which interfaith cooperation is considered part of the waters of their tradition.
9. In 1893 here in Chicago, the Parliament of World Religions welcomed Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu and Catholic leaders to its podium. They declared that from now on the great religions of the world would make war no more on each other, but on the great ills that afflict humankind.
10. After Martin Luther King had gone to India and experienced the religious diversity of that country in 1959, he came back to his pulpit in Montgomery and preached on Palm Sunday: "O God, we thank You for the fact that You have inspired men and women in all nations and in all cultures. We call You different names: some call You *Allah*; some call You *Elohim*; some call You *Jehovah*; some call You *Brahma*; and come call You the *Unmoved Mover*." Let us take that heritage of interfaith cooperation, recognize that it is a key story of the American tradition, and commit ourselves to writing the next chapter in it.

Get together with one or two other people and share your responses to what you read together. Listen carefully to the response of each person, noting that even in these responses there can be a place for diversity and for respect of difference.

OPTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Before going on to choose from the following options for conversation and reflection, watch the rest of the DVD for Session 1, in which Eboo engages with a small interfaith group in Chicago.

OPTION 1: LIFTING UP THE STORIES

In the conversation that follows his teaching, Eboo Patel acknowledges this reality:

In every era there are forces of prejudice in the United States. In every era across our history the forces of pluralism, the forces that say we will be a nation where people of different backgrounds live in equal dignity and mutual loyalty, have risen up and confronted and defeated the forces of prejudice.

Nick notes that in school the narrative that he often heard was the narrative of conflict in religious communities that could not get along. He asks, “What needs to shift?”

Eboo responds:

When it comes to the way we are taught about religion in typical schools in the U.S., it's one of two things:

- *a narrative of freedom of religion based on constitutional values and guarantees which is supported by the American legal tradition;*
- *a narrative of religion as conflict in which people will say that different religions have always fought and will always fight.*

The single most important thing we can do is to say that the story of inevitable conflict between people of different religions is simply wrong. It's not inevitable. There are just as many stories of interfaith cooperation as there are of interfaith conflict. We need to lift up those stories!

Maham takes the cue from Eboo and offers one of those stories:

My dad's a businessman who suffered for about 18 months when he found out that he was on some kind of a scrutiny list. It was a conversation that would take over our dinner table every night. As the American who was born and raised here, I would say, "You need to fight this in court. We have rights. This is such a denial of the American tradition!"

However, my dad so believed in the American dream that he would say, "Let them do all the checking they want to do because maybe through this they will realize that I'm just as American as they are: that I'm contributing to the economy, that I'm a good businessman, that I follow ethical business practices, and that I employ several people.

It had never struck me that way. We're always so quick to jump to perpetuate the conflict or to solve the conflict. I think conflict can be an opportunity to defend or to discuss what it is that's really bothering us. If we take a look at that context of history and conflict we face today, there's this big gap in which there's a conversation that isn't being had. That's what it points to. We've taken it so much for granted living in this country. Yes, we're a nation of freedom of religion, but how is that manifesting itself actually?

Take time to tell some of your stories that illustrate the ways that people you know are extending, through the specific actions and choices, the narrative of freedom of religion and diversity.

OPTION 2: TO BIGOTRY, NO SANCTION

In his book, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), Eboo Patel expands further on the leadership of President George Washington in setting a clear standard of religious freedom right from the beginning of the founding of the United States. The following is taken from pages 14 and 15 of that book:

In 1790, President Washington heard a plea from Moses Seixas, of the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island. Seixas was worried about the fate of Jews in the new nation. Would they be harassed and hated as they had been for so many centuries in Europe? Washington knew other religious communities had similar concerns. He chose the occasion of his response to Seixas to state plainly his vision for America:

The Government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens... May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid. (*George Washington, "To Bigotry No Sanction," American Treasures, Library of Congress, August 17, 1790, <http://www.loc.gov/>.*)

Washington is offering a vision of a national community, not simply articulating a legal doctrine: in America, people will have their identities respected, their freedoms protected, and their safety secured. They will be encouraged to cultivate good relationships with fellow Americans from other backgrounds, no matter the tensions and conflicts in the lands from which they came. And they will be invited—and expected—to contribute to the common good of their country. *Respect, relationship, and commitment to the common good*—those were Washington's three pillars of pluralism in a diverse democracy.

Washington came to his views through both principle and practical experience. As the leader of the Continental Army, the first truly national institution, Washington recognized he was going to need the contributions of all willing groups in America. The rampant anti-Catholic bigotry at that time was disrespectful to Catholic identity, a divisive force within the Continental Army, and a threat to the success of the American Revolution. Washington banned insults to Catholics like burning effigies of the pope, told his officers to make sure the contributions of Catholics were welcomed, and scolded those who disobeyed with words like these:

“At such a juncture, and in such circumstances, to be insulting their Religion, is so monstrous, as not to be suffered or excused” (Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America*, New York: Random House, 2009, 65).

It was the same in Washington’s private life. When seeking a carpenter and a bricklayer for his Mount Vernon estate, he remarked, “If they are good workmen, they may be of Asia, Africa, or Europe. They may be Mohometans, Jews or Christians of any Sect, or they may be atheists” (Paul F. Boller, *George Washington and Religion*, (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1963, p. 120). What mattered is what they could build.

1. How do his references to “the heroes of diversity” in American history influence the way you see the history of the United States?

2. Which other leaders, either national or regional, have made a difference in the development of the United States as a nation of religious pluralism?

You will hear Eboo making reference to the same kind of principled leadership of other founding leaders: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Discuss the following questions in your group. (**Note:** If there are more than 10 people in total, you might want to begin by discussing these questions in smaller groups of 4-5 members each. In the early sessions of a series, people are sometimes reluctant to express their views in a larger group. Breaking up into smaller configurations can really help people to feel more at ease in the conversation.)

3. Where do you see a need for visionary and assertive leadership to address current situations where the full practice of religious pluralism is still not realized?

OPTION 3: HOW FLAT THAT WOULD BE!

Vicky introduces a slightly different aspect of this matter of diversity and pluralism, namely the beauty of diversity. Here's what she says:

Many of us think of ourselves as relatively educated people. I have studied American history and I didn't know these things about George Washington. In this season of a presidential election, we tend to hear a lot about our founding Christian principles: "We are a Christian nation!" No we're not! And the more we allow that rhetoric without challenge the more difficult it is for us to learn from each other, to rest on one another's strengths instead of all assuming we're all like Ian and me—Christian—a majority. How flat would that be, even though I love my Christianity! How flat would that be if that were all we were!

It's one thing to be an advocate for the dream of pluralism and freedom from prejudice, but it's something else to be in love with diversity and multicultural, multi-religious reality. How flat life would be if it were all one thing: one kind of tree, one kind of fruit, one kind of bird, one kind of human, one kind of religion.

1. Stand in a circle together and celebrate the diversity of life and religion in this way:
 - Go around the circle with each person naming some kind of diversity in life that they really love. Go around as many times as you have things to say!
 - Now go around the circle and name aspects of religious diversity that you appreciate. This will be harder because what you know has limitations.

- It's all right to say things that you only dimly know about another religion (for example: "I like that Judaism has a special candlestick with seven candles." You may not know that it is called a *menorah* and that the design of it was given to Moses as described in Exodus 25:31 as a symbol of Divine Light.)
- You might also say things about religions in general: "I love that religions have sacred spaces or sanctuaries that are specific to the narrative and sacred imagination of each religion."

2. Return to your chairs when you are done and discuss:
 - What did you notice in that process about your own capacity to celebrate religious diversity?

OPTION 4: SPEAKING ABOUT YOUR RELIGION AND YOUR WEIGHT

Read this conversation aloud in the group with group members speaking for Maham, Karen, Eboo and Nick:

Maham:

When I'm working with teenagers through programs at IYC (Interfaith Youth Core), a lot of time my parents get nervous. Or when they hear how I'm going to be involved in an interfaith thing they are afraid that I'm going to be converted or something like that. The truth is that religion just makes people uncomfortable. The question you have to ask is, "Why?"

Karen:

I lived in Thailand for a while. When we got there the Thai government tried to educate us about cultural differences and what we'd get into when we were thrown into the middle of nowhere. In the United States you don't ask about what someone weighs or their religion, but our teachers told us that those would be the first two questions that will come out of a Thai's mouth. And it was. Most of the people had never met someone from outside their community. Because I was thrown into that, it opened my eyes to what I believed. I was then an ambassador of myself instead of just being an American visitor. I think that the concern my parents had and what a lot of other parents have is about what will deepen their child's roots in what they raised them as.

Eboo:

If we don't cultivate and advance a positive public language of religion we simply forfeit the territory to people who have a poisonous public language. The fact is we live in a world and country that is awash with religion. Let us not be bathing in the waters of religious prejudice; let us be bathing in the waters of religious pluralism. If we want to do that, we have to be advancing that positive language.

Nick:

Part of me wonders if it's this culture too: we just don't talk about religion and we get nervous about it. I don't know if that's the kind of anxiety that then comes up if it's discussed in history. Why is it that we fixate on conflict as opposed to these stories?

Maham:

There's the irony—the Catch 22: we've created this America where we strive to be pluralistic and we say everyone has freedom of religion, so we don't talk about religion because we're giving people that privacy and that freedom. What that's done is close the door to conversation and perpetuated fear because they are unfamiliar, unknown and untouchable. But that doesn't stop the media from telling the stories of conflict. So you're stuck.

1. As you listened to the four of them speaking, where did their wide-ranging conversation most catch your attention or connect with your personal experience?
2. As you think about your own discomfort in speaking about personal things that really matter to you (like your religion and your weight), could you imagine being more assertive about engaging with others in conversations about what it means to you to be free to practice your own faith? (Let's leave weight out of it for now and focus on what can really make a difference.)
3. What kind of religious conversations would you most like to initiate with people of your faith and people of other faiths? Brainstorm a list of questions and topics you would like to pursue in open conversation. It may be that you already have religious diversity in the membership of your group. Use that to advantage by raising the questions you most want to ask one another and creating time to respond to them. If your group is more of a monoculture, then think of a way you could create opportunity to engage in open conversation with people of other faith traditions.

OPTION 5: WE ARE SIKHS TODAY!

These sessions just happened to be filmed three days after the shooting of worshippers at the Sikh Gudwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, in which six people and the gunman died. Gautam, Maham and Caryn reflect on the significance of this event, with Maham noting that some people in the media were trying to understand why the shooting happened. They surmised that the perpetrator of the crime accidentally mistook the Sikhs for Muslims.

Maham goes on:

I was so grateful to the leader of the Sikh community who asked, "Why is that even relevant?" This would have been just as sick no matter who was killed. This was not the question to ask. Let's not take this conversation in a direction that validates this hatred toward a certain group.

Eboo then makes this observation:

I'm reminded of a time when there was vandalism against a synagogue in Chicago. Some of my Muslim friends went to the vigil in support of the synagogue with signs that said, "We are Jews today." I feel that's the best of America coming to the support of the Sikh Gudwara saying, "We are Sikhs today." And the Sikhs in their remarkable grace saying, "We don't want to be known as "not Muslim." The distinction to be made is not between Muslim and Sikh. It's between "murderers" and the rest of us.

One of the most inspiring threads in the American story are moments when communities who have been marginalized stand up not just for themselves but for

deeper and bigger principles. They're not just saying, "I want freedom for me." They are actually saying, "I want freedom for everybody." The great African-American poet Langston Hughes encapsulates this in a beautiful line of poetry:

*O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to
me,
And yet I swear this oath--
America will be!*

Together imagine ways that you could, in your local situation, build relationship and express solidarity with people of other faith traditions.

OPTION 6: PERSONAL REFLECTION

Following the session you will continue to think about issues raised both on the DVD and in your small group. This suggestion for journaling is offered to support you in continuing your reflection beyond the session time.

Write a letter to someone who is in a position to continue to maintain the powerful tradition of interfaith cooperation that is bedrock of American identity. This could be anyone from a teacher of your children or grandchildren to the President of the United States. Your intention is to support, encourage and inspire them.

CLOSING

From the Sikh tradition:

Ardaas*

You are the Divine Master, to You I offer this prayer.
This body and soul are all Your property.
You are our Mother and Father, we are Your children.
Within Your Grace, there are so many joys!
No one knows Your limits,
O highest of the high, most generous Divine.
The whole of creation is strung on Your thread.
That which has come from You is under Your command.
You alone know Your state and extent.
I Nanak, Your slave, am forever a sacrifice.

Divine Mother and Father,

(Insert personal prayers; add your own in the space provided):

- Bless these new friendships.
- Deepen our capacity to embrace differences as gift.
- Open the fullness of our lives to receive sacred insight from all traditions.
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

—Vaheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Vaheguru Ji Ki Fateh.

**Ardaas* is the name of the prayer that this verse belongs to. It's a prayer of supplication.

Sikh scriptures are written in the first and second person. While various Gurus contributed to the scriptures, they each referred to themselves as *Nanak*, after the first Sikh Guru. So when Sikh scriptures are read they are read in the first and second person, as conversations between the Gurus and the Divine. Sikhs get a chance to step into the shoes of the Gurus and experience their relationship with the Divine.

The last line is the equivalent of *Amen*. Sikhs say it at the end of all their prayers. *Khalsa* refers to all spiritual beings connected to the Divine. *Vaheguru* is the Sikh word for the Divine. It means, “Wow! Amazing Deliverer from darkness to light.”

So the line means *To Vaheguru belongs the Khalsa, To Vaheguru belongs all triumph*. In this line, by “triumph” Sikhs mean “all blessings and successes come from the Divine.” They also use this line as a greeting between Sikhs. So when they greet each other, and when they finish their prayers, they remind themselves that they belong to the Divine, and all blessings and triumphs belong to the Divine. Everything is sourced back to the Divine.

—With appreciation to Sukhvinder Vinning, Surrey, BC, Canada,
for this insight into Sikh prayers.