



## Interfaith Relations Newsletter

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### Towards a Dialogue of Civilizations

The term “clash of civilizations” popularized by Harvard professor Samuel Huntington, in a book by the same name has come under intense criticism. Yet, many observers began to call the cartoon controversy that erupted in February, a clash of civilizations. Maintaining that this is an unhelpful characterization, the NCC, on February 13th, called instead, for a “dialogue of civilizations.”

A dialogue of civilizations is one that will bring together not only religious leaders, but political, academic, media and business sectors of society. While acknowledging the deep differences among us, such a dialogue will encourage participants to come to a common table at which we can educate each other about those parts of our faith and life that are most holy and significant. It will also provide the opportunity for people of different faiths to come together on values that unite us.

Interfaith relations is quickly becoming mainstream. The National Prayer Breakfast this February, a traditionally evangelical Christian event, was an interfaith event. Sen. Norm Coleman, Minnesota Republican, was the first Jewish co-chairman, and Jordan's King Abdullah, a Muslim, attended the breakfast and gave a major luncheon speech later.



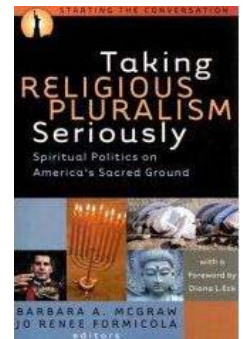
*King Abdullah II of Jordan at the luncheon following the National Prayer Breakfast in February*

In his speech, the King called on the moderates of Christianity, Islam and Judaism to unite. "In every generation, people of faith are tested," he said. "In our generation, the greatest challenge comes from violent extremists who seek to divide and conquer. Extremism is a political movement under religious cover. Its adherents want nothing more than to pit us against each other, denying all that we have in common. To overcome this foe we must explore the values that unite us, rather than exaggerating the misunderstandings that divide us. Together, we have a duty to this generation and many to come to witness to the positive role of faith in public life.... Humbled through that faith, strengthened by that faith, we can, with God's help, create a more just and peaceful future."

In our work of the Interfaith Relations we have used significant resources and energy to grapple with theological concerns around interfaith relations, educate churches and to create and sponsor dialogue tables and events with people of other faiths, both nationally and locally.

A new stage in our work that will bring business, academic, political and media leaders to the table, is now emerging. In their recent book *Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously: Spiritual Politics on America's Sacred Ground* (Baylor University Press, 2006), Barbara McGraw and Jo Renee Formicola provide us some useful tools.

America's fundamental identity is rooted in freedom of conscience, writes McGraw. This is not moral relativism as many fear, rather, it is a pluralism that welcomes all religio-cultural expressions in the free and open public forum. This pluralism is itself, "America's Sacred Ground." From here the founders sought to build a multi-religious democratic nation with a "ground-up approach to government."



Building such a good society, McGraw suggests, requires two types of dialogue: a "Civic Public Forum" and a "Conscientious Public Forum." A civic public forum is designed for dialogue about the extents and limits of legitimate governmental action, while a conscientious public forum is meant for dialogue within the purview of consciences and expressions of meaning. Creating and managing the tensions in such dialogues still need to be worked out. There is of course much more in the book written by a distinguished group of scholars reflecting on the nature of such dialogues from the perspective of several religious traditions. I will write a more thorough review later this month on my blog site: <http://www.nccinterfaith.blogspot.com>.

How would we use these and other tools in preparing for a Dialogue of Civilizations? This would be an important conversation in the days ahead.

## Interfaith Relations Commission Meets in Pasadena

The NCC's Interfaith Relations Commission met from February 2nd to the 4th at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. The commission's members are representatives of the member communions of the NCC and experts in Interfaith Relations invited by the Commission. The highlight of the meeting was a dialogue between the commission (as a part of the Ecumenical Movement) and faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary (as a part of the Evangelical Movement). A significant portion of the work of the commission was done by three caucus groups: Interfaith staff of communions who reflected on their distinct responsibilities, academic theologians who considered how to move the theological agenda forward and communion leaders who strategized about moving their communions to the next level of engagement in interfaith relations.



**The Commissioners: Seated l to r:** Rev. Stanley Bhasker, Rev. Dr. Gwynne Guibord, Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund (chair), Rev. Rothang Chhangte (co-chair)

**Standing l to r:** Fr. Francis Tiso, Rev. Willard Bass, Dr. Amos Yong, Dr. Michael Birkel, Dr. Peter Makari, Rev. Nathan Digby, Dr. Doug Mills, Dr. Michael Reid Trice, Dr. Paul Rajashekar, Mr. David Leslie, Dr. Frances Adeney, Dr. Don Dayton, Dr. Jay Rock, Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, Mr. Guy Higachi (our host from Fuller)

**Not in picture:** Rev. Dr. E. Gail Anderson Holness, Bishop Sudharshana Devadhar

## Some Actions of the Commission

### 1. A Muslim Christian Dialogue

Understanding the urgent need to create a dialogue table of representative leaders from Christian communions and Muslim organizations, the commission agreed to give high priority to getting it organized. The interfaith staff caucus would give leadership to this initiative, beginning by writing a Memorandum of Understanding which would be a vehicle to bring Christian communions on board as well as to present to our Muslim colleagues. That process is already underway.

### 2. Interfaith Education

A brochure on theological reasons why Christians should engage in interfaith relations will be published in the near future and will be made available to churches.

### 3. Racism and Interfaith Relations

The realization that since most people of religions are from varied cultures and ethnicities, continuing racist attitudes in our culture may indeed be a significant obstacle to interfaith relations came to the forefront of our conversation. We will explore this question further.

### 4 . AAR Special Topics Forum Again this November

“Christian Theology’s Engagement with Religious Pluralism” was the theme of the Special Topics Forum held at the American Academy of Religion meeting in Philadelphia last November. Over 200 theologians and theological educators attended. Our distinguished panel included Prof. Diana Eck, Dr. Paul Rajashekar, Dr. Damayanthi Niles, Dr. Tony Ritchie and Rev. Dr. Francis Tiso. Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund chaired the panel.



*Prof. Diana Eck speaking at our Special Topics Forum*

We’ve been invited to organize another Special Topics Forum at the next AAR meeting in Washington DC this November. Our theme will be “Christian Theology’s Engagement with Religious Pluralism: Biblical Texts and Themes.”

The Academic theologians caucus will explore publishing these papers as a theological resource for Christians seeking to engage in interfaith relations.

## Ecumenical Dialogue with Evangelicals: Interfaith Relations Commission Meets with Fuller Faculty

Acknowledging the difficulties inherent in the terms Ecumenical and Evangelical, NCC's Interfaith Relations Commission spent a full day in dialogue with the faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary during our Commission meeting. The impetus for this dialogue came from conversations at previous commission meetings at which we acknowledged that interfaith relations is one of the fault lines of this unfortunate polarization in the Body of Christ.



**Engaging in table dialogue are l to r: Rev. Michael Livingstone (NCC President), Dr. Young Lee Hertig (Faith and Order Commission member), Prof. Don Miller (USC Center for Religion and Civic Life — Listening Observer), Dr. Frances Adeney (PC(USA)), Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar (United Methodist)**

Prof. Howard Loewen, Dean of the Fuller School of Theology, who invited us to Fuller and organized the Fuller side of the dialogue, began the day with a sermon based on Jesus' prayer in John 17, that we all may be one, set the right tone for the dialogue.

Two presentations followed: one by me on "Ecumenical Attempts at Interfaith Relations" where I traced the key theological motifs and learnings throughout the past

century (see my blog site: [www.nccinterfaith.blogspot.com](http://www.nccinterfaith.blogspot.com)) and the other by Prof. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen on "Evangelical Attempts at Interfaith Relations," where he similarly identified theological motifs from the Evangelical perspective.

In 1999, the NCC adopted a policy statement on interfaith relations called "Interfaith Relations and the Churches" which forms our theological rationale for this work. Prof. Terry Muck (Asbury Theological Seminary) who was one of the main architects of the document walked us through its main theological motifs. (You can read the policy statement at the NCC website: [www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifr.html](http://www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifr.html).)

The task of the table dialogues that followed was to identify key questions that may form the agenda for future dialogues. Here's a sampling of those questions:

1. One group asked a set of three questions
  - A. Does God want all people to be Christians?
  - B. Can only Christians be saved?
  - C. What is salvation anyway?
2. What is our theology of community? Is an individual saved and then community formed as the saved come together, or is the community saved?
3. What is our eschatology — what do we believe about heaven and hell, and about end times? These often influence our perspective on evangelism and mission.
4. How do we think about mission and dialogue? Is it dialogue *for* mission, dialogue *or* mission or dialogue *and* mission?
5. How do we develop a theology of inter-visitation — of worship and sacred spaces, venues for friendship and hospitality?

Thinking together about these and other questions, many felt, would be useful in bringing our communities closer together.

## A Visit to New Horizons School, Pasadena

As a part of our commitment to meet local religious communities we met with some Muslim leaders of Los Angeles area, including Salam Al-Marayati, Executive Director of Muslim Public Affairs Council. We held that meeting at a local Islamic school, the New Horizons School in Pasadena.

Established in 1984, this K-8 school recently received the prestigious National Blue Ribbon Award from the US Department of Education for their students scoring in the top 10 percent in the nation in reading and math.

An important part of the school curriculum is helping Muslim students to learn Islam and provide a community that affirms their identity. At a time when Muslim children face the brunt of prejudice in this country, the work of the school in forming young people with a strong American Islamic identity, we agreed, is critical.

We were impressed by the alternative Pledge of Allegiance which the students recite every morning. It is illustrative of the school's care in trying to form the students' identities.

***As an American Muslim,  
I pledge allegiance to God and His prophet.  
I respect and love my family and my community,  
and I dedicate my life to serving the cause of truth and justice.***

***As an American citizen,  
with rights and responsibilities,  
I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,  
and to the Republic for which it stands,  
one nation, under God, indivisible,  
with liberty and justice for all."***

## News from the Interfaith World

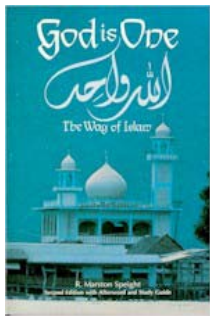
### World Council of Churches Affirms Interfaith Dialogue

The WCC at its General Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, heard its Moderator, Catholicos Aram I make an impassioned plea for interfaith dialogue, adding, "according to Christian pneumatology, the Holy Spirit's work is cosmic; it reaches in mysterious ways to people of all faiths." The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams too, offered a strong affirmation. It is "now recognized as one of the most pressing needs of our time. In addition to the theological issues arising from the shrinking of the world and the ever more porous boundaries between communities, religion has become an increasingly significant component in inter-communal relations," he said.

Subsequently, the General Assembly adopted a "Minute on Mutual Respect, Responsibility and Dialogue with People of other Faiths." It stresses the importance of interfaith dialogue on a local and a global level and urges churches and councils of churches to "create platforms for such dialogues." For WCC General Assembly documents please go to: <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/>

### God Is One Training Now Being Held

Two training events on March 11th at Hartford Seminary and March 25th at Union Seminary will bring together potential teachers of Adult Education Classes and pastors of churches who would use Marston Speight's book *God Is One: The Way of Islam* and its six-week long study guide written by Jay Rock, Director of Interfaith Relations at Presbyterian Church (USA). The day-long training conducted by Hartford's Muslim scholars will give participants a basic grounding in Islam. We anticipate taking this training to local communities. If you are interested in hosting a training in your community, please contact me.



### Jewish - Christian Dialogue Continues

Significant changes that have occurred on the ground in Israel/Palestine will inform the agenda for our next Jewish Christian Dialogue meeting, on March 29th.

Although distrust of the new Hamas government prompted US and Israel to withhold funds from Palestine, the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace, a coalition of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders, urged against such an action. James Wall in his *Christian Century* article of March 7th argued: "Hamas won in a free and fair democratic election. Not to accept that fact is to announce a new definition of democracy in the Middle East: election winners may govern only if they are approved by the U.S. and Israel."

### "Faith in the Neighborhood" Series

Dr. Lucinda Mosher is a regular supporter and consultant to our work and programs. She chairs the Diocese of New York Episcopal-Muslim Relations Committee, and teaches the annual Worldviews Seminar at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

She is the author of the remarkable new series: *Faith in the Neighborhood*. In the two present volumes she interweaves interviews and personal



stories from people who are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Bahá'í, Zoroastrian, Shinto, Afro-Caribbean, Native-American, and adherents of traditional Chinese religions in to two coherent themes, *Belonging* and *Praying*. *Belonging* explores how these religions conceive of community, and how they acknowledge life's stages: welcoming babies, rites of passage for adolescents, initiation, and conversion. *Praying: Rituals of Faith* focuses on public, family, and personal worship—how people of various religions take part in rituals, celebrate festivals and holidays, go on pilgrimage, and say their prayers. These are must-read books for anyone interested in navigating the exciting diversity of our neighborhoods.

To order call: 1-800-242-1918, [www.churchpublishing.org](http://www.churchpublishing.org)

### NCC Resources

*Eradicating Global Poverty, A Christian Study Guide on the Millennium Development Goals*, written by Lallie Lloyd, is a compelling and possibly life-changing guide for church schools and other study groups

*For the Peace of the World: A Christian Curriculum on International Relations* is an 87-page book, edited by Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos, the National Council of Churches' Associate General Secretary for International Affairs. It examines the issue of peace and international relationships with essays, Bible studies, prayers, litanies and other worship resources.

To order go to: [www.nccusa.org](http://www.nccusa.org)



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