Islamic Science Rediscovered

What does it Mean for Inter-Faith Relations Today?
A Note on Public Agenda’s Choicework Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of Community Conversations and classrooms by journalists and researchers, and by individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Customizing to Fit Your Situation

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways—they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation.

Public Agenda’s Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides as discussion starters for Community Conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda’s approach to Community Conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, “beyond the usual suspects”
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda’s approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Guides (including print and video versions), please visit our website www.publicagenda.org and click on “Public Engagement.”

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Introduction

We live today in an increasingly globalized society where different cultures and faiths are brought into closer contact than ever before. This situation presents both extraordinary possibilities for cross-cultural sharing and profound challenges. While greater opportunities exist for the blending and sharing of cultures, longstanding tensions across cultures and faiths remain. In some cases these tensions may well be more intense precisely because the boundaries between cultures and faiths are thinner and more porous than ever before.

Our contemporary situation raises many serious questions: How can and do different cultures and faith groups find ways to live together in peace and prosperity in a shared society? To what extent are tensions between different faith groups and cultures inevitable? How should these tensions be understood and handled? History provides us with a number of resources for thinking about these questions and about how we might answer them today.

The exhibit Islamic Science Rediscovered highlights a period in history when there was a great deal of productive cooperation and sharing among Christians, Muslims and Jews. People of these different faiths and cultures learned each other's languages, translated each other's great works of literature, philosophy and science, and interacted with relative ease and civility.

What implications does this have for inter-faith and cross-cultural relations today, in our community, in our nation and in the world? Here are three different ways of thinking about this question. Which one do you think is the most useful approach, and why? And are there other ways of approaching inter-faith and cross-cultural relations that are not covered in these scenarios that we should also consider?
Islamic Science Rediscovered: What does it mean for Inter-Faith Relations Today?
Approach A:
Sharing and Blending are the Keys to the Future

This period in history is an example of how we can and should live together. With instant worldwide communication and a global economy, people are more connected than ever. When we are open to sharing our traditions and adopting pieces of other people’s cultures and faiths, we are able to work together and learn from each other in ways that make us better off than any of us would be if we just stayed to ourselves and our own kind. Being able to share and blend our cultures and faiths is more important than being able to hold on to a single, self-contained tradition.

Those who agree say things like:

We should encourage as much sharing, mingling, blending and borrowing among cultures as possible and work towards building a peaceful global society in which no culture or faith is more concerned with maintaining its own, individual “purity” than with getting along with and learning from others.

Those who disagree say things like:

The idea of an integrated society and world is a thin veil covering a kind of forced assimilation that devalues some people’s cultures and faiths.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- Some people might say that wanting to be part of all cultures and faiths is the same as having no culture or faith, and that we need to commit to something if we’re going to lead a meaningful life. What do you think of that argument?
- Some people might say that cultures and faiths clash because they carry fundamentally opposing values—how can we be expected to be open to and tolerant of cultures and faiths that have elements that strike us as morally wrong?
Approach B:  
May the Best Culture Prevail in the Marketplace of Ideas

From this perspective, this historical period was just a fluke. In reality, people from vastly different faiths and cultures rarely get along so well. We need to recognize that conflict is part of life, decide which faith and culture offers the greatest advantage to the world and work peacefully to see that this culture prevails in the marketplace of ideas so all can share its benefits.

Those who like this approach say things like:

We should welcome and encourage debate across cultures and faiths so people can decide which one should prevail.

Those who disagree say things like:

It may be true that conflicts often arise between people from different faiths and cultures but that doesn't mean one must triumph over the others. If we “live and let live” we can keep the peace without having to come into conflict with each other.

Questions to consider about this approach:

• Some people might say that a “marketplace of ideas” approach can’t work because different cultures and faiths don’t have an equal chance of being heard and appreciated. What do you think?

• Some people might say that culture and faith should be handed down to us and preserved for future generations and that a “marketplace of ideas” model isn’t appropriate for something as important as faith and culture. What do you think?
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A Mission Of The Heart: Leaders in High-Needs Districts Talk about What It Takes to Transform a School
Approach C: To Each Their Own

Perhaps this period was a fluke, but that doesn’t mean we should be thinking about one or another culture and faith “prevailing.” That’s a recipe for endless conflict. And we don’t need to blend cultures and adopt pieces of other people’s faiths, either. Rather, we should be thinking about how people with vastly different worldviews can live in peace without having to lose their own traditions. And the best way to do that is for people to be free to practice their own faith and live out their different cultural customs as they see fit in the privacy of their own homes, schools and communities.

Those who agree say things like:
We should encourage people to practice their religions and cultures privately, while fostering a “live and let live” attitude among diverse groups.

Those who disagree say things like:
“Separate but Equal” didn’t work in post-Civil War America and it won’t work in the world today.

Questions to consider about this approach

- Some people might say that those who are exposed only to one set of values and ideas are more likely to become intolerant extremists, unable to “live and let live.” Is that a valid concern?
- Some people might say that it is not realistic to think that people can simply privatize things like culture and faith because those things shape our beliefs and how we think about public life. What do you think?
Using This Guide in a Community Conversation, Discussion Group or Classroom Setting

After discussing the choices on the previous pages, you may wish to consider and talk through the following questions.

**Summarizing a Choicework Conversation**

These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework dialogue, prior to considering ideas for further activities.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?

2. What were our important areas of disagreement—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?

3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

**Bridging from Dialogue to Other Activities**

These questions can help you move from deliberation and dialogue about the issue at hand to activities that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?

   *Note: if this question generates a long list of potential activities, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas*

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today’s conversation?

3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today’s conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?
Public Agenda
Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan opinion research organization with an expanding program of citizen education and public engagement activities. Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich.

Every day, thousands of Americans log on to PublicAgenda.org for accurate, up-to-date information on critical issues. PublicAgenda.org has twice been nominated for the prestigious Webby Award. PublicAgenda.org is recommended by Newsweek, Fox News, MSNBC.com and is a USA Today “Hot Site” and a Yahoo! “Web Pick.” Time Magazine.com named it one of the “50 Coolest Websites” and Library Journal has praised the site as one of the best sources on the web.

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