

*MANY RELIGIONS, ONE COMMUNITY:
Lessons from Islamic Spain for Today's World*



Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogues

Remember the goals of this kind of interfaith dialogue:

- ⋮ Understand each other better
- ⋮ Learn from one another
- ⋮ Build relationships of mutual trust and respect

Remember the opportunities of interfaith dialogue:

- ⋮ The chance to ask any questions you may have (in a respectful manner)
- ⋮ The chance to answer these questions
- ⋮ The chance to talk about religion and beliefs in a comfortable environment free from combative arguments, proselytizing, or pressure

Other tips for a successful dialogue:

- ⋮ Be as open and curious as you can
- ⋮ Ask honest questions; remain sensitive to others' feelings
- ⋮ Use your wonderful mind and still come from the heart
- ⋮ Suspend judgment — seek first, second, and third to understand
- ⋮ Talk just enough; leave space for others to talk
- ⋮ Encourage others to listen to each other without interrupting
- ⋮ Let each person define their own faith; don't define it for them
- ⋮ Be prepared to be pleasantly surprised by something someone says
- ⋮ Be sincere and have fun in the process

Many Religions, One Community: Lessons from Islamic Spain for Today's World

A CHOICEWORK DISCUSSION STARTER FROM PUBLIC AGENDA

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 understanding 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 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 documentary film *Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain* highlights a period in history when Christians, Muslims and Jews lived together and flourished. At the height of this era, people of these different faiths and cultures learned each other's languages, translated each other's great works of literature, philosophy and science, and benefited from a time of peace and prosperity. But this period of peace and prosperity was brought to an end by interfaith conflict, misunderstanding and intolerance.

What implications do this historical period and its decline have for inter-faith and cross-cultural relations today, in our community, our nation and in the world? The following pages contain 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?

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. If we don't adopt this approach, history teaches us that our civilization may be in danger of collapsing under the weight of conflict and strife.

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

This historical period was just a fluke. In reality, people from vastly different faiths and cultures rarely get along so well, and the eventual decline and dissolution of Islamic Spain is evidence of how difficult it is to successfully blend competing cultures and faiths. 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 agree say things like:

The case of Islamic Spain shows us that trying to blend cultures and faiths, in the end, only leads to violence because it is unreasonable to expect that people are able to compromise when it comes to matters as deep as religious faith. Therefore, we should welcome and encourage debate across cultures and faiths and let history determine which one prevails.

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 all others. As the violent decline of Islamic Spain shows, conflicts between faiths rarely lead to one side winning but rather lead to the overall decline of civilization. If we "live and let live" we can keep the peace without having to come into conflict with each other and threatening our shared prosperity.

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?

Approach C

TO EACH THEIR OWN

Perhaps this period of cultural sharing and integration was a fluke, but that doesn't mean we should be thinking about one or another culture or 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 together 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. The rise and fall of Islamic Spain teaches us that any other approach (be it one aimed at blending of cultures or one aimed at competition between faiths) is doomed to end in conflict and destruction.

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 the rise and fall of Islamic Spain teaches us that it is not realistic to think 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?

Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain

Discussion Questions from *20,000 Dialogues*

General Questions

- ⋮ Are there any questions you would like the group to discuss?

Comprehension Questions

- ⋮ The movie depicted various examples of tolerance and intolerance. Can you give one example of tolerance and one example of intolerance?
- ⋮ To what extent did Muslims contribute to society in the movie?
- ⋮ Voltaire believed Christianity and Islam contained the core values prevalent in all religions, declaring: All men are brothers, “from Siam to California.” What common core values were depicted in the movie?
- ⋮ Two weeks from now, what will you most remember from the film and why?
- ⋮ What relevance do the movie's themes have to life in the US today? To your life?

Reflection Questions

- ⋮ Have you ever been part of or witnessed a conflict between a Muslim and someone who was not Muslim? How was it resolved?
- ⋮ Do examples of tolerance and intolerance in the movie have any parallels within American society today, especially regarding religion?
- ⋮ Do the leaders depicted in the film share similar qualities to our leaders currently?
- ⋮ Can you name some Muslims who are contributing to society today?
- ⋮ What core values do Muslims, Christians and people of other faith traditions share today in America?

Bridge from Dialogue to Action

- ⋮ What would you like to see happen to follow up on today's conversation?
- ⋮ How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?
- ⋮ To increase understanding between Muslims and people of other faiths, what are the most effective things you can do?

About 20,000 Dialogues and Public Agenda

ABOUT 20,000 DIALOGUES

20,000 Dialogues is a nationwide grassroots dialogue project designed to bring people of different faiths together using films about Muslims to stimulate discussion and promote understanding. It brings the concept of interfaith dialogue into the hands of ordinary people who want to make a positive difference. 20,000 Dialogues is guided by participant-directed dialogues, equipping everyday citizens with the tools and resources to turn dialogue into action. In addition to facilitating dialogue, 20,000 Dialogues partners with national and community-based organizations to offer leadership facilitation training, a national network for service projects, and opportunities to continue the dialogue.

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public opinion research and civic engagement organization with a mission to help citizens better understand critical public issues and to help American leaders better understand the public's values, concerns and views. Since its beginnings in 1975, Public Agenda has been a pioneer in the practice of public engagement, with hands-on experience in hundreds of communities and on dozens of tough issues.



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For more information or to request a copy of "Cities of Light", contact 20,000 Dialogues Outreach Coordinator, Daniel Tutt at daniel@upf.tv