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ENCOUNTERING THE RELIGIOUS OTHER: LIMITATIONS OF CONFINING  
'RELIGIOUS' CONVERSATION IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN DENVER

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A Thesis

Presented to

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Master of Arts

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by

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June 2009

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Title: Encountering the Religious 'Other': Limitations of Confining 'Religious'  
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## ABSTRACT

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.  
Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963).<sup>1</sup>

Technology, the Internet, and the ability to communicate with one another instantaneously in any place on the globe, at any point in time have made Dr. King's remarks increasingly evident in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We now have the unprecedented ability to communicate with people of all groups, all over the world, but are lacking the proper tools for understanding them. The interreligious dialogue movement has strived to utilize religion as one tool, but its biases have limited its success. Authentic dialogue can only be achieved by moving towards a broader definition of 'religion,' beyond the Protestant Christian paradigm in order to come to a place where one may authentically understand, the 'other'. This paper illustrates this by combining scholarly research with case studies of three interreligious dialogue programs in the Denver area.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gustav Niebuhr, *Beyond Tolerance*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), xx.

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## Introduction

The moral...is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways... 'Religion' is not a native term...It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' in anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

The interreligious dialogue movement has attempted to bring people of different religious traditions together in order to gain a better understanding of the 'other'. While the world grows continually more interconnected and interrelated, the necessity to be able to interact and understand one another has become increasingly imperative. The interreligious dialogue movement in the United States has sought to limit misunderstandings between different religious groups and to build community between them. However, in my informal conversations about religion and observations of interreligious dialogue in the Denver area, I began to notice that the language and assumptions about 'religion' reflected, largely, characteristics of Protestant Christian religion. In this paper, I argue that the Protestant Christian biases inherent in framing the way dialogue is conducted, inhibit the efficacy and the potential for an authentic

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<sup>1</sup> J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 281-282.

exchange between religious ‘others’.<sup>2</sup> I will illustrate this through scholarly research coupled with the investigation of three dialogue programs in the city of Denver, Colorado to understand the way these biases play themselves out.

In order to understand how these biases limit dialogue, it is important to define the Protestant Christian paradigm that I am discussing throughout our study. In Chapter one, I describe the central components of Protestantism of faith (or belief), authoritative text and theology, and the separation of religion and politics that are present in interreligious dialogue. In this chapter, I also give a brief history of how Protestantism has influenced American institutions and has become the gauge for defining ‘religion’ in the United States.

In Chapter two, I utilize Edward Said’s famous work, *Orientalism*, as an example to illustrate the pitfalls and limitations that exist where groups have attempted to understand the ‘other’ in their own terms. This gives insight into the potential pitfalls that interreligious dialogue organizations face in the United States when functioning in the Protestant Christian paradigm.

In Chapters three, four, and five, I explore three different organizations that currently lead, or have led, interfaith or interreligious dialogues programs in the Denver, Colorado area. Through interviews with the executive directors, founding members, and a leading lay member of these three different organizations in the Denver area, I illustrate that each group defines ‘religion’, and subsequently, what constitutes ‘religious’

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I am using “authentic exchange” to denote a dialogical exchange of information where each party is able to express themselves on an equal and safe platform, in their own terms, to describe the religious quality of their individual life, however they define it.

conversation, using these Protestant Christian characteristics. The first organization I worked with was the Colorado Muslim Society (CMS) which has participated in interreligious dialogue for many years, but has increased its intensity and efforts since September 11, 2001. The Colorado Muslim Society's interreligious work is based on providing education about Islam, much of the time, to a largely Protestant Christian audience.

The second interreligious organization I studied is called the Abrahamic Initiative (AI) which operates out of St. John's Episcopal Cathedral. AI has been conducting *interfaith* dialogue since 2001. This organization brings participants from the three Abrahamic traditions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism to discuss issues of understanding, commonalities, and differences. This organization has developed over a period of eight years and has expanded its participation from initially an Episcopalian organization to include members from all three traditions on its board and in its process of planning. However, AI advertises itself as an *interfaith* organization and struggles to maintain equal representation on their board and at their discussions. I argue the Protestant language of 'faith' colors the programming and conversation during dialogue, and therefore, limits the exchange between people of different traditions who place less emphasis on this concept. Conversely, the Abrahamic Initiative has attempted to expand its format of dialogue beyond a forum style, to include small dinner groups in hopes to create a more intimate setting where personal and authentic exchange is able to take place.

Lastly, I describe an interfaith program called *Face to Face: Faith to Faith*, led by Seeking Common Ground (SCG), a Denver-based organization, and a Protestant Institution based in New York City called Auburn Theological Seminary (ATS). I have personally worked with SCG for the last year as an intern gaining understanding about dialogue and the dynamics within dialogue. SCG seeks to empower individuals and build peaceful communities through understanding the ‘other’. Through an interview with one of the co-founders, and additional research, I found that *Face to Face*, initially, focused programming largely on theology, and I argue the resulting limitations were largely a result of the Protestant paradigm which emphasizes theology.

In the United States, interreligious dialogue has expanded largely among people of the Abrahamic traditions, which include Judaism, Islam and Christianity. As a result of this fact, this paper will focus largely on outside scholarly research and my own, which centers on interreligious dialogue among the Abrahamic traditions. Dialogue that includes groups apart from these traditions brings additional challenges to the table. Other scholars have begun this conversation to acknowledge some of the unique challenges these types of dialogues pose.<sup>3</sup> However, because this paper is arguing for moving beyond a Protestant Christian understanding of ‘religion’ during dialogue, I believe insight from this paper may be applicable to interreligious dialogue dynamics outside of the Abrahamic traditions. Further study will be necessary to confirm such a conclusion.

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<sup>3</sup> See Mark Burkson, “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Promises and Pitfalls,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 19, 1999, 181-186.



At times in this paper, it may sound like I am making essentialist comments, descriptions, or arguments when describing religious traditions, and why we need to expand our understanding of ‘religion’ when in dialogue. I am not arguing that there is a base or singular/right form of any tradition. Nor am I claiming these examples to be representative of all the people of one religious group, or that no diversity exists within each group. In fact, this diversity is what has motivated this paper. To a large degree, I resort to, and utilize generalizations to heighten our awareness, to make us more cognizant of those whom we may, potentially, be leaving out of the dialogue. I am in no way attempting to make an essential statement about Islam, Judaism, or Christianity. Rather, I seek to give voice to those who may not have a place at the table yet because of the conversation colored by Protestant Christianity.

In order to improve the potential for understanding the ‘other’, it is essential that we move beyond the Protestant Christian paradigm into a dialogue which allows participants the opportunity to express themselves in their own terms, through self-defined terminology, in a safe and neutral space. I conclude this essay by acknowledging how working in a Protestant Christian framework can alienate different groups. Utilizing work from my research and my interviews, I include paths for change that could limit this inherent bias that exists in much of American dialogue. I utilize my experience working with Seeking Common Ground, and I seek to offer steps for improvement in the approach to dialogue with the ‘other’ in a more holistic and egalitarian way in Appendix B.

In this paper, I hope to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the efficacy of interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding among people of different religious

traditions. W.C. Smith writes, “It is what the Hindu is able to see, by being a Hindu that is significant. Until we can see it too, we have not yet come to grips with the religious quality of his life.”<sup>4</sup> In this effort, I hope to provide insight into these underlying assumptions about ‘religion’. I hope this paper may be utilized by practitioners so the enterprise of interreligious dialogue will continue to be refined and improved, and that we may be better able to “see what the Hindu is able to see, by being a Hindu,” rather than see others through a Protestant Christian lens.

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<sup>4</sup> W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, (Fortress Press: New York, 1967), 138.

## **Chapter I: Protestant Religion as ‘Religion’**

We hear the term ‘religion’ referred to all of the time in the United States but few of us recognize the major underlying assumptions we carry with it. For our current study we are interested in understanding what constitutes ‘religious’ conversation. I argue that much of the interreligious dialogue carries assumptions about ‘religion’ that derive from a Protestant Christian paradigm. When we confine our definitions of ‘religion’ to Protestant Christian characteristics, we limit the potential for authentic exchange during dialogue with non-Christian groups.

The United States is a nation that was built, largely, on Protestant Christian roots and influences. All American Presidents but one have been Protestant Christians. Today, Protestants make up 54% of the current 111<sup>th</sup> Congress alongside another 30% that identify as Catholic and 8.4% Jewish. These statistics suggest that Protestants still hold the majority of influence in policy-making, and greatly affect the direction and perceptions of the American public. It is only in the very recent years that other religious groups like Jews and Catholics have had a greater role in representation in U.S. government.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Masci, “Faith on the Hill: The Religious Affiliations of Members of Congress,” *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, Dec. 19, 2008.

Today, Protestant Christians also make up the majority religious group in the United States.<sup>2</sup> I am arguing that what is defined as ‘religion’ in the collective consciousness of American culture has been derived from, or is greatly influenced by, the Protestant Christian tradition that underlies the roots of modern America. In order for interreligious dialogue to be a successful endeavor, the definitions of ‘religion’ that Americans carry have to be examined. In this chapter, I will discuss some foundational components of Protestant religion in order to show how these have become assumptions found in American interreligious dialogue in the subsequent chapters.

### **Protestant Christianity and the Predominance of Faith Over Works**

However diverse and distinct individual Protestant groups are, Protestant Christian religion possesses certain common characteristics or traits found throughout all Protestant traditions. I utilize Robert MacAfee Brown’s work, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, as a guide to understand some of these common characteristics. Brown points out that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian Reformer, Martin Luther, looked to the Bible verse, Romans 1:17, which states, “The just shall live by faith,” in order to differentiate his idea of what Christianity should be from the powerful Catholic milieu that existed in his time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#> (accessed January 29, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Robert MacAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1965), 61. Prior to Luther’s investigation of Romans 1:17 in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, it was already understood by Christians that people were born into original sin based upon the Genesis story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. From a Catholic perspective, redemption from this original sin was to come through both faith in

Luther would find in Romans 1:17 the answer he was looking for. “The just shall live by faith,”<sup>4</sup> implied for Luther that faith, or belief, in the savior Jesus Christ was the way to achieve salvation. He saw this as an overlooked verse that could expose the ills and halt the indulgences and exploitation of Christianity by its institution, the Catholic Church. Luther extrapolated from this verse and Paul’s letters an understanding where God loved His people even before they did any act or work, and in fact, loved them from the start even though they were born in original sin. The reformed Lutheran calculation of redemption, then, could be described as salvation by God’s grace through the act of faith of each individual person.<sup>5</sup> As a result, faith became distinct from actions and created the separation between the two for Protestantism. This idea that faith was valued over works in order to gain salvation has forever changed the way that the Christian Western world has conceived of not only Christianity, but the concept of ‘religion’.

Luther’s realization in the 16<sup>th</sup> century has had a direct impact on societies where Protestant Christianity is the dominant religion. During the enlightenment period, the term ‘religion’ started to become understood as a “system of beliefs,” rather than a series of works or actions as a result of the Reformation and Protestant influence and

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Jesus Christ and through good works, like fulfilling sacraments and doing good deeds. Luther, as a young Catholic devoted himself to the Church in order to try and “justify” himself through those specific Catholic works that were available to him. But, he was left unsettled never knowing whether or not he had done enough.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 1:17.

<sup>5</sup> Robert MacAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, 63.

expansion.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, following the Reformation, the term “orthodoxy” took on a new meaning. Prior to this event, the term could mean, “right” or “correct praise or worship.” With Luther’s reinterpretation of Christianity, orthodoxy came to mean primarily, if not, exclusively “right *belief*.”<sup>7</sup> Malory Nye, citing a work by Talal Asad claims, “[Protestant Christian] thinkers on religion needed to find in other traditions ‘something that exists beyond the observed practices, the heard utterances, the written words’, and hence it was necessary to assume religious beliefs, a basis for religion.”<sup>8</sup>

As a result of Luther’s work and the subsequent Protestant movements, individual faith or belief, became the foundational characteristic of ‘religion’ and has found its way into American conceptions of ‘religion’. Further, Nye points out,

In countries that developed influential intellectual and academic traditions (particularly Britain, Germany, and the USA) it was Protestant assumptions and culture that generally predominated. And it was very often deeply religious Protestant thinkers who had the strongest influences on the development of these traditions.<sup>9</sup>

For example, many of what have become known as the Ivy League schools like Harvard, Yale, Brown and Columbia Universities were all started as Protestant Universities. These Universities have maintained high influence in the academy, culture, and American society in general.

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<sup>6</sup> W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, (Fortress Press: New York, 1967), 75.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco Publishing, 1989), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, 104.

## ***Sola Scriptura* and the Importance of Theology in Protestantism**

American conceptions of 'religion' usually imply that authoritative holy texts are central to religion. Clearly, many religious traditions do possess a holy text, but Protestantism places the text at the center of their 'religion' due to the concept of *sola scriptura*.

*Sola scriptura*, or "scripture only," as the final authority in the Protestant tradition has led to the emphasis on text in American conceptions of 'religion'. In contrast to Catholicism where the priests are seen as mediators between the people of the congregation and God, the Protestant doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' determined that one could, in fact, have a direct relationship with God, devoid of a mediator. The way to do this would be to have faith, but to understand the inner workings of one's faith through scripture and theology.

Many in Luther's time believed that Catholic traditions, over time, had come further and further from the truth of the New Testament and the Gospels which illuminated and pointed to Jesus Christ, the redeemer.<sup>10</sup> During the Reformation, those who critiqued the Catholic Church began finding discrepancies between what the Church claimed to be "right" and what they found in their newly translated Bible. Protestants decided to make this change and take the authority out of the hands of a human institution like the Church. This would tear away the veils of the traditions and get to the only authority that Protestants believed was not tainted: the scripture itself. As a result, the

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<sup>10</sup> Robert MacAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, 69.

reliance on scripture alone and individual salvation would help make Protestant Christianity unique to other forms of religion.<sup>11</sup>

In the United States, there has been much infighting among Protestants about which translation is the most official or legitimate. The rise in fundamentalism that began in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America, has largely been led by conservative Biblical scholars out of theological schools like Dallas Theological Seminary, who tend to focus on literal interpretations of the Bible. However, in more liberal forms of Protestantism, the Bible is read with historical criticism and can be read allegorically. In both of these cases, much of what divides the liberal and conservative Protestants is in how the text is read. Nonetheless, because of the concept of *sola scriptura*, the text remains central in both cases.

### **Christian Roots in the Separation of Church and State**

The separation of church and state, or religion and politics, is highly valued in American society. Although it is difficult to determine whether this separation is distinctively rooted in Protestantism, scholar, Stephen Feldman argues this separation is a particularly Protestant Christian invention.<sup>12</sup> Feldman argues the New Testament, especially the book of Matthew, provides the foundation for a dualism between body and spirit that helped set the foundation for the separation of politics and religion. In

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<sup>11</sup> MacAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Feldman, *Please Don't Wish Me a Merry Christmas*, (New York: NYU Press, 1998).



Matthew 22:21, Jesus states, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s.” Feldman argues, “This statement seemed to recognize and approve of the existence of two realms with separate authorities: the civil or political realm subject to the Roman emperor, and the religious realm subject to God’s authority.”<sup>13</sup> In effect, this verse has helped to draw a distinctive line, not only between body and spirit, but between the ‘religious’, and civil, or political life. Feldman argues, Jesus did not deny the importance of civil law, but he acknowledged it as separate from the spiritual, or ‘religious’ realm.

According to Feldman, this dualism combined with the emphasis of faith over works, would help lay the foundation for the separation of church and state, and the recognition of the two facets of life as distinct from each other in Protestant American culture. Balmer and Winner argue that although the disestablishment of religion in America is largely credited to Thomas Jefferson, who was a Deist, the American Protestants were the driving force behind this movement.<sup>14</sup> For example, the early colonial Baptist communities in Virginia formed coalitions calling for the ban of state-sponsored religion and wrote a bill called, *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, which would become the precursor to the First Amendment of the American Constitution.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Feldman, *Please Don’t Wish Me a Merry Christmas*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Randall Balmer and Lauren F. Winner, *Protestantism in America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 48-49.

<sup>15</sup> Balmer and Winner, *Protestantism in America*, 48-49.

As the dominant religion, Protestant Christianity supported and was conducive to the separation of church and state in America.<sup>16</sup> The United States was able to maintain its high level of religiosity with a tradition that relied on faith and belief over works, hence allowing for secular law. Had religious law been primary in Protestant religion, the attempt to form a secular government would have limited the success or ability for those groups to maintain their high level of religiosity. In this way, Protestants could render to Caesar (or Washington) what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. This combination helped seal the success of the separation of the two entities known commonly as 'religion,' and politics in America.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Spread of Protestantism and its Effects on 'Religion'**

The impact of enlightened thinking in the period of colonial expansion led to an understanding of 'religion' as an anthropological form of observation, or one that could be studied and understood by an outsider as a function of human experience. Colonial expansion brought people of different religious traditions into very close proximity with the dominant, colonial Protestants. A genus and species taxonomy was created so that

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<sup>16</sup> Even the title, "separation of church and state," illustrates the inherent Christian bias that was present in its formation.

<sup>17</sup> As history will show, even with a Protestant majority, the United States has struggled to maintain this separation throughout its history. However, I argue that the religiosity of Protestants has been able to flourish alongside secular law due to the centrality of faith in Protestantism.

words could be used to describe the different forms of a single noun, 'religion' (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.).<sup>18</sup>

This taxonomy was created, utilized and reproduced by those who were the dominant group at the time, the Christian West. As a result, when Protestant Christians found other 'religious' peoples they utilized their own tradition as the gauge to describe those traditions they found. It is here where we see the element of belief starting to infiltrate what was to be considered a 'religion'. Coming from a tradition of Protestant Christianity where actions are seen as an *expression of one's faith or belief*, rather than a group's 'religion', the explorers presumed that what lay at the core of an act, was something that lies in an individual's head or heart. For example, J.Z. Smith points out that the Encyclopedia Britannica of 1771 describes the two major classifications of religion and theology to be, "To know God, and to render him a reasonable service...Man appears to be formed to adore, but not to comprehend the Supreme Being."<sup>19</sup> It is clear to see that popular concepts of religion at this time start to reflect characteristics of Christian belief in a single God, the ability to communicate with the Supreme Being (implicitly, through prayer), the Supreme Being's ability to act in history and be called upon, and that the human purpose is to love this God. Smith goes on to say that in the 1755

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<sup>18</sup> J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 271.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 271.

*Encyclopedia of the English Language*, the definition of ‘religion’ is, “Virtue, as founded upon reverence of God, and expectations of future rewards and punishments.”<sup>20</sup>

This accomplished two goals for Protestants. The first goal is that it gave them a monopoly on what religion was and what it was not. This gave them the power to legitimize or exclude other traditions to be named as ‘religions’. J.Z. Smith points out that during this period, the term, ‘religion,’ was used largely as a means to differentiate between those who were the European Christian explorers and those who were ‘other’. ‘Religion’ became a term that linguistically, created the ability to show who was part of the in-group or “true”-group, and who was the ‘other’ or outside group. Actually, it was not until the entrance or challenge of other forms of ‘religion’ that the term started to develop in the popular vernacular.<sup>21</sup> And secondly, it gave Protestants the ability to maintain their own tradition because it declared other traditions, ‘religions’, dependent on whether belief, and the inclusion of a single God were central or not to their tradition.

These definitions of religion do not apply to several different groups. For example, in popular and traditional Buddhism, there exists no concept of a single all-knowing and powerful God. Rather, in Buddhist traditions, there exists the concept of the “Triple Gem,” or the three refuges described as the Buddha, the dharma, and the

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<sup>20</sup>J.Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” 271.

<sup>21</sup> J.Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” 270-271.

sangha.<sup>22</sup> This system also depends on the observance and practice of obtaining karmic merit through deeds so that they will be reborn in another realm.

### **Protestantism In America**

Defining religion became an enterprise in Europe as Protestants began settling the New World which ultimately became the Americas. The first Protestant Christians to come to the New World were English Anglicans who landed in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. Following these English Anglicans were Swedish Lutherans, German Lutherans, Scottish Presbyterians, Quakers, Anabaptists, and many other Protestant groups. The colonies that they landed in were breeding grounds for new Protestant movements and the ability to recreate and express their religious identities freely and help create a new society. Balmer and Winner point out that by the middle of the eighteenth century, all thirteen colonies would have flourishing diverse Protestant communities.<sup>23</sup> The Americas provided a new solace from persecution and violence that ensued throughout Europe following Luther's Reformation.

During the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in America, there was great diversity that grew out of Protestantism, but the groups that became part of "Mainline Protestantism,"

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<sup>22</sup> The three refuges remain central in Buddhist practice. One takes refuge in the Buddha, or attempts to act as the Buddha did. The dharma has been described as the teachings of the Buddha, ultimate reality, and that which makes up ultimate reality. Finally, the sangha is understood as the monastery, but also has come to mean the larger Buddhist community, as well. For more information, see Robinson, Johnson, Thanissaro, *Buddhist Religions, A Historical Introduction*, (Kentucky: Wadsworth, 2005), 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> Randall Balmer and Laura F. Winner, *Protestantism in America*, (Columbia University Press: New York, 2002), 13.

would forge a new idea of how Protestantism would be expressed. This took great shape in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today, the Mainline Protestants, which include groups like the United Methodist Church, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and some Presbyterians, are more likely to read the Bible more figuratively, be open to homosexuality, have liberal views about the rights of women and minorities and have historically preached, what Balmer and Winner call, a “Social Gospel.” This means that these Protestants read the Bible as a map to improve the social conditions of their time. Theologians and activists like H. Reinhold Niebuhr and Phoebe Palmer were part of this group and became social activists for different causes like speaking out against World War II and cleaning up their communities.<sup>24</sup> The liberal values and motivation for social improvement has led these groups to take a lead in the interfaith and interreligious movement.

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<sup>24</sup> Balmer and Winner, *Protestantism in America*, 13-31.

## **Chapter II: Orientalism, and the Pitfalls of Seeing the “Other” in One’s Own Terms**

There are many social, political, historical, and epistemological dynamics that underlie a specific interaction between people. In interreligious dialogue, this, of course is the case, but the stakes are higher than a customary conversation between two people because the process is designed explicitly to try and gain an authentic understanding of the religious “other.” Edward Said, a twentieth century Palestinian-American scholar, was quite acute to these dynamics and devoted the latter part of his life to exposing the power relations that exist in what I term, the epistemology of the ‘other’. His groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, uncovers the way that “self and other” have usually been differentiated through the lens of a Christian Western in-group, and an Islamic Eastern out-group. Said’s work gives us great insight into the potential pitfalls and effects of defining the ‘other’ in our own terms. In this chapter, I will also point out the implications of Said’s work when attempting to understand the ‘other’ (non-Christian) in the process of interreligious dialogue.

Said’s work in *Orientalism* would claim that these aforementioned dynamics should be explored and investigated in order to have a better understanding of those whom we are studying. In the case of this essay, I believe it is equally important to explore these same dynamics when attempting to have an authentic exchange during

dialogue. We can apply Said's work in *Orientalism* to interreligious dialogue so that we may understand what is at stake when we interact with, and perceive, the 'other'.

Said reads in between the lines of popular and official texts used and created in Christian Europe from the time of the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon to the present day to describe the "Oriental." He found the "Oriental," was depicted as the "other" to the Christian European. The academic and political discourse Said critiques depicts an image of the Oriental which led to a negative, uncivilized, and monolithic characterization of all the peoples living in the previously unknown area deemed the "Orient." Said shows this image has been so strongly infused into the discourse that it has become (and is largely today) the starting point for many Western perceptions, theories, and discussions of Islam and the Oriental 'other'.<sup>1</sup>

Said argues that the "Oriental," or the "other," was characterized as monolithic, lacking progress, and stagnant. This was started by Napoleon's efforts to collect as much data from the foreign Egyptian people that the French could by having French scientists, social analysts, academics, politicians, and many others to record everything that they found in this new land. Said argues the image of the 'other' was born, not out of the experiences, literature, or even testimonies of the 'other' peoples, but out of what European scholars and scientists saw, experienced, perceived, and reproduced about the 'other'. What resulted from the Orientalist project were gross, overarching generalizations and definitions that became labels for those whom the Europeans

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 12-15.



encountered before, during and after colonial expansion.<sup>2</sup> This discourse about the area called the “Orient,” Said argues, became the body of knowledge and the basis of the European and Western imagination of the Oriental “other.”

Said’s work is controversial in the academy and has been called into question by many scholars like Bernard Lewis and others.<sup>3</sup> However, what comes out of his work is rather insightful for our study of Protestant assumptions of ‘religion’ and their effects in dialogue. Dialogue is a project for people to explain the religious quality of their lives so that understanding can exist between different groups. Like the Orientalist describing the Oriental in terms outside of her own, asking a Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, etc. to explain the religious quality of their life in Protestant Christian terms does not do justice to the ‘other’s authentic self.

In the Orientalist literature the descriptions of the people who were studied did not include the voices of the group(s) being studied, and more accurately, were reflections of the dominant Christian paradigm and perspective rather than representative of the paradigm of the ‘other’. For example, Orientalists coined the term, “Mohammadan,” to describe the religion of Islam in the same way that “Christianity” is the term used to describe people who believe in the story of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> As many Christians will claim, the uniqueness of Jesus lies in his divine nature, namely, as the Son of God. However, those with knowledge of Islam fail to make

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>3</sup> For further information, see A.L. Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader*, (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 66.

the parallel between Muhammad and Jesus in their respective traditions. Muhammad is revered as the last Prophet of God sent to bring the final divine message. He is not understood to be God incarnate and does not lie at the center of Islamic thought. It is also clear in Islam that there is no room for divine beings outside of God because Islam holds to a strict monotheistic worldview.<sup>5</sup> It is not only inaccurate to describe Muslims using Jesus as the comparable point of reference, but it becomes something entirely false and antithetic to Islam. This falsity comes about using the terms and point of reference of the dominant tradition, Protestant Christianity.

Said claims, rightly so, Orientalism actually states more about the researcher than it does about the people with whom s/he is interacting. The pertinence for our study of interreligious dialogue is in the error of understanding that happens between the participants, brought about by dialogue framed in a Protestant paradigm. Said's study illustrates the importance of including the voices of 'others' and developing dialogue structures that foster the abilities and opportunities for participants to speak for themselves. Only then, may an accurate picture of who they are emerge. If dialogue continues in a Protestant Christian framework, it will continue to limit the authenticity, at best, for those who are not a part of Protestant Christianity.

This projection of the "other" in terms used, created and perpetuated by the powerful and majority group led to the creation and reinforcement of an imagined superiority and paternalism of the European over the "Oriental" and helped support the

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<sup>5</sup> One pillar of Islam is called the *shahada*, which professes the existence of one God and Muhammad as God's last prophet.

contemporary paradigm of colonization. Said points out, “The Oriental was always *like* some aspect of the West...[the Orientalist’s] work [is] to be always converting the Orient from something into something else; he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture, in some cases for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of the term “Mohammadan,” Muslims were compared negatively to Christians and in European eyes, ultimately deemed “imposters” of the “true” religion of Christianity and a perceived threat to the Christian European way of life.<sup>7</sup>

Said also points out that he does not believe that Orientalism was a “nefarious ‘Western’ imperialist plot to hold down the ‘Oriental’ World.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, this was not a premeditated project with clear motives and methods that the Europeans were necessarily aware of. They may have even been well-intentioned. In the same way, many interreligious dialogue leaders are very well-intentioned and may not be aware of the impact of the unspoken Protestant Christian assumptions that are held about ‘religious’ conversation. I believe that we are *all* subject to Orientalism today, especially in the process of interfaith and interreligious dialogue projects. It is for this reason it is important to critique the underlying assumptions of religion when we engage in interreligious dialogue.

Achille Mbembe has continued this conversation and has taken Orientalism one step further. One of the factors that cannot be excluded from the study of religion, post-

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

colonial theory argues, is the study of history and the power relations that have pushed very large groups of people out of the discourse. Similarly, cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz points out, “The whole point [to studying culture]...is to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live, so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.”<sup>9</sup> In order to understand the religious ‘other’, it is important to include room for conversation of culture, history, politics, conflict, and power relations.

Mbembe offers an alternative way of thinking or “seeing” the world now that it is interconnected at an unprecedented level. He offers certainty that people cannot be seen in single-identity forms anymore due to the globalizing nature of the world. He states,

Post-colonial thinking stresses the fact that identity arises from multiplicity and dispersion, that self-referral is only possible in the in-between, in the gap between mark and demark, in co-constitution. In this situation...the colonized person is a living, talking, conscious, and active individual.<sup>10</sup>

Working in a Protestant Christian paradigm is highly outdated and inappropriate for our times. This new way of thinking about world relations is one of multiplicities. By “multiplicities,” Mbembe is referring to a plurality of identities that each individual carries with him or herself. Mbembe is aware that the world is becoming more global, de-territorialized and intermixed. This brings to light the fact that people have depth and that it is impossible for any one person to have only one single identity, like Christian,

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<sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” In Michael Martin & Lee McIntyre, *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1994), 227.

<sup>10</sup> Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur, Jean-Louis Schlegel, “What is Post-Colonial Thinking: An Interview with Achille Mbembe,” *Eurozine*, January 9, 2008.

Jewish, Iranian, father, doctor, etc. that does not interact with the other facets of one's life. In a publication by the World Council of Churches (WCC) on Interreligious Relations in 2001, it is acknowledged that,

The continuing globalization of economic processes, and of information, is associated with increases in human mobility through migration, refugee movements and the growth of transnational networks...New relations between people across traditional ties and webs of interests have created new loyalties and identities.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, "People define themselves in terms of *various* identities related--for example--to nation, religion, culture, family, gender, age and work. In dialogue, no dimension of personal identity excludes another (emphasis added)."<sup>12</sup> As this may not be a new phenomenon, in the twenty-first century, one's identity is becoming increasingly more interconnected and interdependent on others throughout the world.

### **Implications for Dialogue**

I believe the Protestant notions of 'religion' have influenced general conversation today about 'religion'. In informal conversations, consistently, the question, "What do they believe?" is one of the first to be asked when discussing a religious group outside of one's tradition. Or, as I described above, another question might ask, "What does their holy text say about 'x'?" But how well do these questions approach understanding the religious quality of another's life? Malory Nye points out that in Arabic, Hebrew and

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<sup>11</sup> World Council of Churches Office on Interreligious Relations, "Striving Together in Dialogue: a Muslim-Christian call to reflection and action," *Islam and Christian-Muslim relations*, 12, no. 4 (2001): 483.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

Pali, the major languages used in traditional Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, respectively, there is no direct translation of the word ‘belief’. Although these different traditions do, in fact, carry with them a component of faith or belief in God, Nye observes this concept is not the dominating component of these respective traditions, nor is ‘belief’ the only way these groups conceive of their traditions.<sup>13</sup>

Further, Nye points out, “The practice of religiosity in non-Christian contexts may emphasize other aspects of behavior than belief, such as ritual.”<sup>14</sup> This is true in Hinduism, Buddhism, and is also true in both Islam and Judaism. These religious traditions focus more attention on the law and practice of their respective traditions. For many Muslims, when asked how Islam penetrates their lives, the answer is not usually, “It is my religion,” but that, “It is my way of life.” Traditional Islam is focused on providing the ‘right’ or straight path of life rather than on the right belief system.<sup>15</sup> This distinction can be also described as the difference between orthodoxy, or “right belief,” and orthopraxy, or “right practice.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 103.

<sup>14</sup> Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 103.

<sup>15</sup> It is clear that one of the five pillars of Islam is the *shahada*, or the profession of faith, which claims that there is only one God and that Muhammad is His prophet. However, the emphasis on this pillar, is largely on the *act* of professing, and the submission to the one God. This is seen by the necessity of a witness of a witness during the *shahada*. Also, the remaining four pillars all have to do with orthopraxy, or actions relating to the religion. In addition to this, the Islamic shari’a law determines much of how a Muslim will conduct his or her life.

<sup>16</sup> The distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy is not the only way religion can express itself differently between people, but I have used it to help clearly demonstrate that working in a singular system (e.g. Protestantism) can limit the conversation greatly.

The same holds true for those of the Jewish tradition as well. Traditional Jews seek to follow the 613 *mitzvot*, or commandments. Abiding by these commandments is what strengthens the relationship between God and the Jewish people. Scholar, Michael Fishbane observes,

There is...no abstract affirmation of faith in Judaism. Rather one performs the *halakha*, [Jewish law] and, through it, affirms Jewish values and ideals. Characteristically, a traditional Jew is not called a 'believer,' but a *shomer mitzvot*, an 'observer of the commandments,' and a traditional Jew is not considered pious in the abstract but only being quit through the *halakhic* obligation required on a given occasion.<sup>17</sup>

The Orthodox branch of Judaism calls itself *orthodox*, but the real differences between this branch and other branches of Judaism lie in the level of observance to *kashrut* dietary laws, purity laws, and the rest of the *mitzvot*. Traditionally, Islam and Judaism are systems that govern their respective followers' lives, outside of what is "essentially cognitive."<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, individual salvation does not necessarily make sense in a Jewish context. The Jewish tradition bases the relationship between God and the Jews on the communal activity and actions, or how the community conducts itself with each other and other peoples of the world. Fishbane points out,

Since...performance (in traditional Judaism) is not merely individual, but often depends on a quorum of others, *halakhic* observance also brings the Jew into

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<sup>17</sup> Michael A. Fishbane, *Judaism*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987), 83-84.

<sup>18</sup> I recognize that there are different sects of Judaism and Islam that may not observe the *halakha* or *shari'a* law as strictly as the orthodox do. My point is that people in these traditions focus on other components outside of belief and theology, and remain limited from expressing their religious lives when asked to present themselves in a Protestant Christian terms during dialogue.

conformity with other members of the community who feel equally bound by the legal-religious strictures of the *halakha*.<sup>19</sup>

Unique to the Israelite tradition (later, Jewish tradition) was the Mosaic Law which determined not only how people should interact with God, but it brought prescriptions of how the Israelites were to interact with each other and other groups. This included the ways in which Jews should treat other Jews, as well as non-Jews. In this way, much of the understanding of the relationship between God and the Jews are in terms of the interaction between the Jewish community and less through individual relationships with God. This difference in the relationship to God between Jews and Protestants determines differences in the way that their respective religion expresses itself in each of their lives.

Thirdly, as I pointed out above, the overwhelming emphasis on authoritative scripture, or holy text, in Protestantism can find its way into Christian-centered interreligious dialogue. But not all traditions have a holy text, or if they do, most adherents of the tradition may not read, or rely on, these texts as the foundation for their religious traditions. For example, the Hindu Vedas may be referred to as the holy texts in Hinduism. However, traditionally, the Vedas were writings that only the Brahman priests read and used in the expression of their tradition. In other words, this “holy text” was only applicable, to a small percentage of practicing Hindus, and continues to remain so, leaving many devotees out of a conversation based around holy text.

The emphasis on text during dialogue became clear when I recently attended an interreligious event held at the University of Denver where each speaker from a different

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<sup>19</sup> Fishbane, *Judaism*, 83.



religious tradition was asked to describe how their respective “holy text” dealt with issues of peace and justice. This exercise was able to work fine for the Jew, Christian, and Muslim, but the woman who represented Hinduism described that the question was misleading or difficult to answer due to the *lack* of emphasis or centrality of text in the tradition of Hinduism.

Emphasizing issues of belief, authoritative text, in religious conversation does not speak to the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions in the same way as it would to Protestants. As a result, it limits the ability for these different groups to express the way their religious traditions shape their lives, and to describe the religious quality of their life. For example, if a Muslim defines Islam as a comprehensive way of life, and only is allowed to describe what the Qur’an says, this would be limiting, as the Qur’an is just a set of guidelines for those actions. In the same way, asking a Muslim to describe what they ‘believe’ also limits the ability of the Muslim to express their tradition fully because it would leave the conversation defined in the theology or the Islamic profession of faith, or the *shahada*. Moreover, these questions only shed light on elements *about* Islam rather than how Islam penetrates that specific person’s life because of the inability to express oneself on their own terms.

This process of “coming to grips” with the religious quality of the ‘other’s life, as W.C. Smith put it, only comes through acknowledgement, acceptance of history, but most of all, through the allowance of “otherness.” By allowance of otherness, I mean that one does not attempt, necessarily, to find the common thread in the “other,” but accepts the other, as he or she is, in his or her terms. Mbembe argues, “One only truly becomes a

human being to the degree that one is capable of answering to what one is not the direct author of, and to the person with whom one has, seemingly, nothing in common.”<sup>20</sup>

Mbembe argues that one must learn to be aware of the differences and accept them on their own terms and in their own value in order to address the present reality. This will lead to a more honest and open encounter for all parties involved in dialogue.

It is only in the past thirty years that scholarship and the general discourse have started to critique themselves in the self-reflection and post-colonial thinking of Orientalism. We know also that interreligious dialogue is still in its relatively nascent phases. Said and Mbembe provide great insight into dialogue and the disparity that exists between what is imagined about a group who hasn't had the opportunity to speak for itself in its own terms, and the genuine quality of who the 'other' is when they are given a voice. It is for this reason that interreligious dialogue must not limit conversation to Protestant Christian definitions of 'religion'.

Confining religious conversation to these Protestant characteristics only provides a surface understanding of the 'other', at best, and does not give the religious person an honest opportunity to express themselves as a person of practice and one who lives their life based on the law of their tradition. Successful dialogue comes only when we utilize J.Z. Smith's advice that religion *can* be defined at least fifty different ways. I will spend the subsequent chapters looking at how these characteristics of Protestant Christianity

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<sup>20</sup>Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur, Jean-Louis Schlegel, "What is Post-Colonial Thinking: An Interview with Achille Mbembe," *Eurozine*, January 9, 2008.

have infiltrated the dialogue in three interfaith or interreligious programs in the Denver area.

**Chapter III: The Colorado Muslim Society, September 11, and the Challenges of  
Muslim-Centered Interreligious Dialogue**

One does not have to be in the field of religion to notice that there has been an increase in interreligious and interfaith dialogue taking place in the United States. But one may ask why such a vast increase in the amount of this kind of work has occurred in the recent past. Each of the organizations I have researched cited the events of September 11, 2001 and the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., as catalysts for groups to come together to discuss issues of religion and understanding of the ‘other’. These events illustrated that religion continues to hold great power in the lives of American people and people throughout the world.

Due to the tenuous situation Muslims find themselves in after these events, the Colorado Muslim Society (CMS) has placed their emphasis on educating non-Muslims about Islam. In this effort, CMS has geared the programming of their dialogue, largely to presenting and answering questions in the majority group’s terms, Protestant Christians. As a result, I argue that this design of dialogue is still limiting because it remains colored by Protestant Christian notions of religion.

## **Background**

The Colorado Muslim Society (CMS) in Denver, Colorado has increased their interfaith and interreligious work since September 11 to help bring an understanding of the ‘religion’ of Islam to the American public.<sup>1</sup> Muslims make up one of the minority religious groups in the United States. They have struggled to be included and integrated into the larger American religious landscape, not to mention the public’s imagination about what it means to be religious in this country. Due to the current negative perceptions of Islam held by many non-Muslim Americans following the events of September 11, Islamic-centered dialogue at CMS has made educating non-Muslims about Islam a main priority. These three current factors (minority status, the events of September 11, and the importance of education to non-Muslims, mainly Christians) have helped shape Muslim-centered dialogue at the Colorado Muslim Society to incorporate, and focus, on Protestant Christian perceptions of ‘religion’ that stem out of the larger ‘religious’ framework that exists in the United States.

I interviewed a representative of the Colorado Muslim Society, Dr. Muhammad Hamdi, who leads and participates in much of the interreligious dialogue out of CMS. CMS dialogue is usually formatted as a one hour period which includes a 40-45 minute presentation about Islam given by Dr. Hamdi, followed by a 15-20 minute question and

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<sup>1</sup> This year there has been less interreligious work that is being done at the Colorado Muslim Society due to a transition that the organization is going through to find another Imam for the Mosque. Dr. Muhammad Hamdi, the representative with whom I spoke described the work that had been done prior to this transition period and current work that he does as an individual.

answer period. Questions from the audience are asked of Dr. Hamdi, inquiring about different aspects of Islam.

### **Muslim Dialogue in America**

Harvard-trained scholar on Christian-Muslim relations, Jane Idleman Smith, observes a growing amount of Muslim involvement in dialogue in the United States, but compared to Christians, the numbers are quite low.<sup>2</sup> Her research cited a number of reasons for this. She found that many Muslims feel as though they are guests in American society and that it is up to Christians to initiate dialogue.<sup>3</sup> She also found that there is a growing number of immigrant Muslims in the United States who are still experiencing culture shock. A third reason suggests that Muslims tire from explaining what it means to be a Muslim to an audience that has no knowledge of Islam at all.<sup>4</sup> All of these factors found in Smith's research suggest that many Muslims still feel like outsiders in a country where according to some estimates, five to seven million Muslims live.<sup>5</sup> I believe this contributes to the way that Muslims present Islam to a largely American Protestant Christian audience when engaging in dialogue, especially when there is a pressure to defend their traditions to the majority group.

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<sup>2</sup> Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2007), 86-87.

<sup>3</sup> Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, 94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>5</sup> PBS Frontline, *Muslims: Portraits of Ordinary Muslims*, "Exploring Tensions Within America's Muslim Community," (accessed <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/muslims/portraits/us.html>, March 15, 2009).

University of Denver professor, Dr. Liyakatali Takim admonishes that it is crucial that Muslims start to develop interreligious and interfaith groups in order to give their non-Muslim counterparts in the United States a representation of Islam that is counter to popular media presentations of Islam. Takim, further says that since September 11, the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and their aftermath, representations have portrayed Muslims as violent, irrational, and “incompatible with Western values.”<sup>6</sup> Takim sees that the appropriate response and way to remedy this situation would be to engage in dialogue with people of other religious traditions. He claims, “Such destructive mythification is often born in spaces of non-contact, adversarial contact, or ignorance. It therefore becomes imperative that Muslims engage in dialogue to counter such depictions of Islam and Muslims.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Presenting *About Islam***

Since the events of September 11, the need for Muslims to leave the status of the ‘outsider’ and move towards a dialogue and interaction with the Christian majority with this new added pressure from the American media has had an effect on the way that dialogue is conducted. This became clear when I spoke to Dr. Hamdi. Dr. Hamdi described that the main focus for the interreligious work being done at CMS is to educate the American public about Islam. In his experience he has found that Americans, in

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<sup>6</sup> Liyakatali Takim “From Conversion to Conversation: Interfaith Dialogue in Post 9-11 America,” *The Muslim World*, Vol. 94, July 2004, 343-344.

<sup>7</sup> Takim “From Conversion to Conversation: Interfaith Dialogue in Post 9-11 America,” 345.

general, do not have a great understanding of traditions outside of their own and need to be educated and receive consultation about Islam.

Echoing Dr. Takim's words, Dr. Hamdi described that the media has played a great role in the rise in interreligious dialogue among Muslim groups:

The intensity came after 9/11...The media have been very negative about Islam and Muslims. [We] have to counter that by explaining ourselves-that is the major objective of it (Interreligious dialogue). Some people say that Muslims are here to convert the United States into a Muslim country (Laughing). That is not the intention. We are very few Muslims in the community here. We want to live in peace like everyone else. After 9/11 in particular, it was so close that the Muslim community be treated like the Japanese [during and after World War II]. [The goal is] to show that Islam is not as it is painted- not a religion of violence and vicious attacks.<sup>8</sup>

The United States has long been a country that has not educated its public about different religious traditions due to the strict restrictions between "church and state" and also disputes between the political right and left. As a result, most exposure the public gets to religious traditions is through the media. Boston University professor, Stephen Prothero suggests that the violence and response after 9/11 stem from a larger issue of religious illiteracy in the United States. Prothero points out that there has been a decline in the religious literacy of United States citizens in the past century.<sup>9</sup> He claims that Americans get very little, if any real education and exposure to religious traditions outside, and of, their own. As an exercise, he asks his undergraduate students to take an exam on their first day of class that asks questions about the books of the Bible, figures in

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<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Hamdi, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, March 25, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 1-25.



Islam and Judaism, the locations and regions where religious traditions developed, and central tenets of each tradition. Prothero dedicates a whole chapter in his work, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't*, to describing how poorly his students perform on this test. With each incoming class of students the scores remain the same.<sup>10</sup> Prothero fears that this ignorance will lead to continued misunderstanding, violence, fear, and hate between peoples of different religious traditions and norms present in the cultural landscape of the United States.

When I asked Dr. Hamdi about whether or not he has taken part in a dialogue with other members of religious groups, he told me the majority of the interreligious work through the Colorado Muslim Society was done through presentations to churches, but also included other organizations like businesses, hospitals, and schools, usually describing Islam to non-Muslims (mostly Christians).<sup>11</sup> For example, Dr. Hamdi has started to teach a class at the Cherry Creek Public schools to educate faculty and staff *about* Islam. In these classes and presentations, Dr. Hamdi tries to focus on what he termed, “the basics of Islam.” He described the “basics” of Islam (in this order) as, “a brief history, the beliefs, the rituals, the five pillars, the legal system, diet, and holidays.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't*, 30-48.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Hamdi also described that the previous Imam had done interreligious work with members of other religions. However, much of the work being done today and throughout CMS's history of this kind of work has followed the presentation style he described.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Hamdi, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, March 25, 2009.

The fact that Dr. Hamdi has placed “beliefs” at the top of his discussion of Islam indicates the importance and centrality of belief in the presentations. As we can recall from the previous chapter, belief lies at the center of Protestant Christian religion. When I asked Dr. Hamdi what types of questions are asked during the question and answer period during his lectures or presentations, he described questions including what Muslims believe about heaven, or the afterlife, and what the Qur’an states about certain actions and beliefs about Islam. I reiterate that belief is a component of Islam, but it is clear to see that the questions from Christians that are asked about Islam tend, predominantly, to be about belief.

As I described above, the question and answer period makes up one-quarter to one-third of the time allotted for the dialogue or interaction. Throughout this time, Christians are asking the questions. As Dr. Hamdi and Stephen Prothero point out, most of the participants or attendants of the dialogue have no previous understanding or exposure to Islam. If this is the case, they are very likely to ask questions in ‘religious’ terms familiar to them, drawn from Protestant Christian notions of ‘religion’. In this way, I argue that this form of dialogue is still influenced by the Protestant Christian notions of religion.

Jane Idleman Smith argues that the presentation-style of dialogue inherently limits the interaction. She describes this format as a “one-way street.”<sup>13</sup> Muslims feel a need to defend themselves, and Christians are very interested in learning more about Islam. In other words, both parties are shaping their roles to the Christian. In this type of

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<sup>13</sup> Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, 64.

presentation style of dialogue, the lecturer organizes the presentation, but tries to present it in a way in which his or her audience will be able to understand it while hopefully, representing the tradition in a genuine light. At the end of the lecture, the questions are driven by the audience, who are mostly Christians.

If we look at this style of dialogue, critically, I believe it is still a Protestant Christian-centered dialogue and interaction. The goals for both CMS and the church group are Christian-centered and catered to the Christian audience. It is simply, *for the Christian* to understand Islam better. The Christian does not get an understanding of how Islam penetrates Dr. Hamdi's life, and Dr. Hamdi does not get an understanding of how Christianity impacts the individuals in the audience. The desired effect of this type of dialogue is for the Christian to walk out of the lecture with more knowledge *about* Islam so that the communities will be able (it is hoped) to tolerate each other. This limits the possibility for each party to really gauge the "religious quality" of the 'other's' life, and is still, Christian-centered.

Dr. Hamdi's presentations are usually geared toward the specific crowd or group with whom he is working. For example, Dr. Hamdi has been called upon to do more "Islamic consulting," on "Islamic etiquette." This "Islamic etiquette," or Islamic norms of interaction, starts to move beyond the previously described Christian-centered format. For example, Dr. Hamdi described some Islamic norms and expectations that non-Muslims should know to teachers, staff, and parents of a local school. He described when a male teacher extends to shake the hand of a Muslim mother at the time of their introduction at a social event, or a parent-teacher conference, the mother may not reach

out to shake the teacher's hand due to restrictions about men and women touching in some Islamic traditions. "In order for him not to be embarrassed, he needs to know this," Dr. Hamdi reiterated. This kind of consulting may provide a new type of dialogue or cultural awareness that seeks to ease interactions among people of different religious backgrounds in order to operate professionally and personally with others in their community.

### **The Separation of Religion and Politics**

Dr. Hamdi also described that there is not always room for all topics of discussion during the question and answer period that usually follows a presentation. He claimed that he maintains a strict distinction between religion and politics, especially in regard to conversations about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He noted,

I was asked to speak about Islam, not politics....People ask questions especially relating to the Palestinian [issue]...and I usually avoid it because it is not the subject that I am really required to handle. They have asked me to speak about Islam and this is what I do.<sup>14</sup>

I described in the last chapter, this separation of religion and politics is a notion rooted in, and allowed to flourish, as a result of American Protestantism. I believe that Dr. Hamdi's response about the separation of these two components represents a particularly Protestant notion of 'religion'. However, one could argue that this is not a 'religious', but an 'American', value. I am arguing the distinction between what has been understood to be 'American' has been founded largely in the Protestant Christian

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<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Hamdi, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, March 25, 2009.

framework, and therefore the two are difficult to distinguish. I will discuss this further in Chapter five when I describe the problems and limitations this Protestant American separation brings to dialogue.

## **Discussion**

It is clear that larger political and social events have helped to shape the design and goals of the Colorado Muslim Society's interreligious dialogue activities. Living in post-September 11 America has largely inhibited the opportunity for open dialogue beyond the current presentation style with which CMS operates with. Clearly, the United States is at a point in its history where representations of Islam have been very negative. Violence has occurred toward Muslims from non-Muslims following the pivotal events of September 11. As Dr. Hamdi described, dialogue is, first and foremost, about this minority community's survival.

I agree with Smith, in that this form of dialogue is limiting in its structure. One 40-minute presentation followed by a 20-minute Q & A period does not leave much room for a deep authentic exchange. Having this be the only time where participants meet and are exposed to Islam also limits the ability to understand the 'other' and move beyond a Protestant Christian paradigm. Despite the promise the format might hold out to those who attend, the dialogue is limited by Protestant notions of religion during the interactive dialogical period, and is overall, superficial, at best. The questions are led, many times, by ill-informed Protestants. This form of dialogue may begin to open minds to the 'other', but an engagement has not happened.

The redeeming effect of the events of September 11 is that it has brought the importance and necessity of interreligious work into the consciousness of the American public. These events have been a great catalyst for interreligious dialogue to expand and grow, but the event has made the priority education about Islam at the Colorado Muslim Society, rather than a mutual exchange. This is not to say that Muslims are not participating in multi-religious and open dialogue in different organizations in Denver. I am simply utilizing CMS as one organization that illustrates the challenges that the Muslim community faces and the way that they have designed their form of dialogue as a result. Dr. Hamdi told me that there is a pressure or urgency of educating the public about Islam that exists, which has taken precedence over becoming involved in the kind of multi-religious exchange between people of different religious traditions that I am proposing. As a result, this survival factor contributes to the way dialogue at CMS is structured- and for good reason. It is difficult to make strong critiques about CMS' dialogue because different goals exist for dialogue.

In the current situation in the United States, where the general public has very little exposure to Islam, as Dr. Hamdi and Professor Prothero suggest, the Colorado Muslim Society is approaching dialogue in a way that engages their audience at the point where they are. At this starting point, a basic conveyance of information that includes the tenets of one's religious tradition, even though in Protestant Christian terms, may be a necessary preface for a future authentic engagement. It seems that CMS makes this their number one priority because as Dr. Hamdi reiterated, it is about the *survival* of the Muslim community in the broader American cultural and social landscape.

It is possible at some point in the near future, once the general public acknowledges the presence of Muslims in the American religious and cultural landscape, that there may be a possibility for an authentic exchange with equal emphasis placed on all individuals. Dr. Takim notes the way for Muslims to be accepted into the mainstream is to become involved in politics and to seek greater visibility in public life. In the near future there may come a time where all participants in a dialogue can express the religious quality of their lives in their own terms and move beyond the Protestant Christian paradigm, toward an authentic exchange at CMS once Muslims are more integrated into public life and society on a large scale. The current contacts that are being made between CMS and other groups in the community may provide the foundation necessary for this type of dialogue to exist in the future. There is a possibility that these contacts could lead to informal or formal prolonged relationships between the two organizations. Today, however, the goal for the Colorado Muslim Society is group survival.

**Chapter IV: The Abrahamic Initiative: The Problem of *Interfaith* dialogue, And  
Movement Toward a More Authentic Exchange**

The Abrahamic Initiative (AI) conducts interfaith dialogue among Muslims, Christians and Jews. The mission statement of the Abrahamic Initiative is “to provide a forum for dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims and to foster mutual understanding and appreciation for the faith perspectives of the three traditions.”<sup>1</sup> This organization’s main goal is to dispel negative images about people of the three Abrahamic traditions and to make room for relationships between them. However, the term “*interfaith*” becomes problematic when discussing religion with individuals outside of the Protestant Christian tradition. In this chapter, I explore the Abrahamic Initiative’s models for dialogue and explain how the dialogue in the forum is colored largely by the Protestant Christian paradigm which may serve to limit the dialogue. In contrast to the forum model, AI also sponsors a “dinner group” model, which engages participants in a more intimate and personal way that allows the opportunity for each member to move beyond the Protestant Christian biases and engage in a more egalitarian exchange.

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<sup>1</sup> The Abrahamic Initiative website, “Mission and Objectives,” [http://www.sjcathedral.org/internal/?page\\_id=48](http://www.sjcathedral.org/internal/?page_id=48) (accessed April 8, 2009).



## Background

The Abrahamic Initiative (AI) is a Denver-based organization founded by Hal Simmons, Susan McKee and St. John's Episcopal Cathedral Canon, Greg Movesian in early 2001. When the organization was created, its goal was to educate the Episcopalian Christian congregation and community about the other two Abrahamic traditions.

McKee explains,

[Initially,] we had no ideas about bringing in Muslims, and Jews into the steering committee or to widen the frame. We thought, 'We are one of Abraham's descendents, let's learn about the other descendents. [The focus] was to learn about Jews and Muslims. There was not a strong tradition of recognizing the other Abrahamic traditions in Christianity.'<sup>2</sup>

The initial goal of the program would be to educate people *of the congregation*, in conjunction with the Christian Education Commission of the Cathedral, about the other religious traditions.

The direction of the program changed dramatically as a result of September 11, 2001. The first scheduled event AI held would be for September 12, 2001 at St. John's Cathedral to include an Imam, a rabbi, and a local University professor of Christianity to explore general differences and similarities in each tradition. After the unexpected events of September 11, 2001, programming moved beyond simply educating Christians within the congregation about the other two traditions, toward reaching out to people of the other traditions in order to provide a forum for dialogue and relationships to be built between Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

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<sup>2</sup> Susan McKee, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, April 1, 2009.

As a result of this shift, the Abrahamic Initiative has engaged in two forms of dialogue. The first type is a forum model that utilizes expertise from individuals who represent and/or study the different traditions. This form of dialogue begins with a short lecture given by a representative of each tradition that is followed by a short question and answer period. These lecturers discuss a topic and describe how each tradition understands, deals with, or stands on the topic. For example, on September 14, 2002, a Christian-Muslim lecture given by a local Islamic and Christian scholar focused on “The Development of Authority” in each tradition. Other lectures have included topics like the role of women, the issue of fundamentalism, homosexuality, shared scriptural figures, mysticism, architecture, images of Jerusalem, musical traditions, and many others.

The direction of the organization is determined by a steering committee. This steering committee determines what kind of programming AI will have, who the speakers will be, and how the organization is governed. At the time of its inception, the steering committee was composed of only Christians. By early 2003, they elected Muslim, Christian, and Jewish members to join their steering committee because there was an interest in having these voices help guide the course of the organization. Currently, there are four Muslims, three Jews, one Humanist, and seven Christians.<sup>3</sup> Once the steering committee expanded beyond Christians, a Muslim Imam was named as the executive director for two years until he returned to graduate school to pursue a doctorate in the

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<sup>3</sup> AI would like to be more representative and neutral, but financial and other practical factors have gotten in the way of this effort. For example, those currently on the steering committee possess full-time jobs, families, and maintain other responsibilities that have made it difficult to spend time advertising and increasing their representation. AI also struggles financially.

area of religion and social change. Until just recently, all Christian members of the steering committee have been members of St. John's Episcopal Church, but currently there are two United Church of Christ members on the committee.

The AI forums currently take place at St. John's Cathedral, largely because it does not cost the organization money to hold lectures there. Most of the forums take place in Dagwell Hall, a large multi-purpose which is decorated with pictures of retired Episcopal bishops and priests. The forums and lectures where larger attendance is expected are housed in the sanctuary of the Cathedral, replete, as one might expect, with Christian symbolism including large Christian crosses. Simmons and McKee both cite this issue as a weakness of the organization. McKee responded, "The place where you hold your events makes a difference. We hold our events at St. John's Cathedral, largely because it is free. The conversation that has happened over the years [has been], 'How can we include more Muslims and Jews if we meet at a Protestant Church?'"<sup>4</sup> While this is not a neutral spot, AI has decided to place their resources into programming rather than having to pay for a neutral location.

### **The Problem of *Faith* and *Interfaith***

The Abrahamic Initiative has striven to include programming outside of the Protestant Christian characteristics that I have pointed out thus far. For example, they have included programming on current events such as the hope for democracy in Iraq, the role of Islam in Europe, and histories of the different traditions. Although such lectures

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<sup>4</sup> Susan McKee Interview, 3/26.

have been incorporated, I argue that they are still operating in a Protestant Christian paradigm.

The Abrahamic Initiative advertises itself as an *interfaith* dialogue program. To understand how this may be problematic when attempting to find mutual understanding and appreciation among different religious traditions, we need to consider some of the different foci within each tradition and the ways that different groups express their particular religion.

I have illustrated in previous chapters the distinct features extant in Protestant Christianity, but to illustrate the inherent Christian biases, it is necessary to point out some fundamental differences that exist between Protestants and Jews. A study done by Cohen, Siegel and Rosen illustrates Jews and Protestants exhibit strikingly different emphases on faith and practice.<sup>5</sup> Their research set out to explain the different ways that Jews and Protestants explained what it means to be religious. Using a questionnaire, they asked their participants to gauge which traits were most important in being a “good member of their religion” where the questions were catered to each specific tradition.<sup>6</sup> They used both a belief scale and a practice scale for Jews and Christians.<sup>7</sup> In their study,

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<sup>5</sup> Adam B. Cohen, Joel I. Siegel And Paul Rozin, “Faith versus practice: Different bases for religiosity judgments by Jews and Protestants,” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33, (2003), 287-295.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 290-293.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen et. al. conducted three studies in all to report these findings. The first study used the same questionnaire for both Protestants and Jews. The second one studied just Jews and used a questionnaire catered specifically to Jewish beliefs and practices. The third study used a questionnaire geared toward specific Protestant beliefs and practices. The belief scale included items like belief in God, belief that religion can answer more fundamental questions than science, belief in an afterlife, belief in a soul, and

they concluded that “In rating what it means to be religious...Protestants rated belief more important than Jews [and]...religious belief predicted religiosity only for Protestants.”<sup>8</sup> They also cite the way membership is conceived of in each tradition. In Judaism, traditional membership is based on birth (i.e. one needs to be born to a Jewish mother) and in Protestantism, it is a matter of a confession of faith (i.e. Protestantism is accessible to anyone who believes).<sup>9</sup>

This study shows that Jews and Protestants generally relate differently to their respective traditions and use different gauges to explain the religious quality of their lives (e.g. practice and belief/faith, e.g. observance of dietary laws and belief in God and an afterlife).<sup>10</sup> This finding is important for our study because the Abrahamic Initiative struggles for “mutual understanding” in their programming. However, the term, *interfaith* implies the priority of belief or faith in each tradition and places this characteristic at the center of the title of many forums. In the lecture programming of the

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belief that the events described in the religious texts of your religion are literally true. The practice scale included attending religious services regularly, reading religious texts of your religion regularly, not having sex outside of marriage, observing religious requirements to give charity, and raising your children with a religious background. For the second study, questions were included about observing the Sabbath, following dietary laws, and frequency of attending religious services for practice and belief in Jewish teaching, such as belief that the Messiah will come and that the Bible is God’s word for the belief scale. For the third study, questions included belief in eternal life and in the literal truth of the New Testament, and practice items included frequency of church attendance and importance of children receiving a religious education.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 293.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 287.

<sup>10</sup> In another study, Cohen found that Jews and Christians cope differently as well. In this study, Cohen found that Christians are more likely to turn to God and belief, while Jews were more likely to cope through their ethnic group and thought the role of God to be irrelevant in the coping process. For further detail, see Cohen, A. B. (2002). “The importance of spirituality in well-being for Jews and Christians,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3, 287–310.

Abrahamic Initiative in the 2003-2004 year, there is constant reference to the three Abrahamic “faiths,” or “faith traditions.” Ironically, in an explanation of the event titled, “The Challenge of Religious Pluralism Within the Three Traditions Today,” it states,

Emeritus Professor...will lead a discussion that often generates much controversy regarding the challenges faced by *faithful* people today within the three traditions who embrace tolerance, diversity, and religious pluralism as hallmarks of their religious *faith* (emphases added).

Another program entitled, “Symbols of *Faith*: Visual Self-Expression in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Traditions (emphasis added),”<sup>11</sup> described the program as “A survey of the myriad visual instruments, used differently and similarly by the three Abrahamic traditions, to express the Divine and the relationship between the Divine and human.” As we saw above, a Jew’s faith in God becomes less important when we are speaking about his or her religious life. Of course, many Jews believe in a single God, but for many, what is more telling of his or her religious life is the relationship through the law and between themselves and their community.

The reference to faith as the central tenet consistently throughout the advertisement and programming schedule may serve to alienate, rather than include Jews and Muslims who do not consider themselves to be part of a *faith* tradition, but rather more appropriately, part of a religious or cultural group. The reference to the three traditions as “faith” traditions is not accurate to describe those from traditions that tend to

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<sup>11</sup> This program also involved a cocktail hour which may have alienated Muslims, or made the space feel unwelcome for those Muslims who do not participate in drinking alcohol per the laws of the tradition.

focus more on the praxis of their tradition rather than on their individual faith as Protestant Christians would.

The Protestant bias has penetrated the Abrahamic Initiative lecture titles and explanations of their events. On September 21, 2003 a lecture entitled, “Heavenly Music,” described, “We will learn how music is used to bring the individual or the community into closer relationship with the Divine, and how music becomes an expression of our deepest *beliefs* and longings in the religious and spiritual context (emphasis added).” The title “Heavenly Music,” is not as appropriate for many people of Jewish heritage. In many sects of Judaism, the idea of heaven, or an afterlife is not fully developed, at best, or acknowledged as important. Scholar Robert Foster points out in formative Judaism, salvation was defined as the Davidic Messiah coming to re-establish the kingdom of Israel for the community *on earth*, rather than in a place called heaven or an other-worldly realm.<sup>12</sup> While many Jews may not describe Judaism and salvation in Foster’s terms in the contemporary world, it helps illustrate differences in conceptions of an afterlife between Jews and Christians that do exist. For example, in a study of American religious differences between Jews, religiously unaffiliated Americans and different sects of Christian Americans, Stephen M. Cohen and Lauren Blitzer found that Jews reported scores even lower than the religiously unaffiliated in all questions related to the belief in an afterlife, heaven or hell and these Jews reported significantly lower

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Foster, (2002), “Why on Earth Use ‘Kingdom of Heaven’?: Matthew’s Terminology Revisited,” *New Testament Studies*, 48, 487-499.

scores than any of the Christian groups.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the term ‘heavenly’ is a misnomer when describing the relationship between the person and the divine for many Jews. For Protestants, on the other hand, the Kingdom of God is represented as an afterlife in heaven and the term, ‘heavenly’, is sufficient to describe the relationship between individuals and God. Other lecture titles include, “The Three Monotheistic *Faiths*: Finding Common Ground,” “*Interfaith* Seminar: Women in the Scriptures- Leadership and Authority,” “Jerusalem: Center of *Faith*, Controversy, and Conflict,” and, “Images of Jerusalem as a Center of Three *Faiths*.”

Another lecture entitled, “Religion as a Source For Peace in the World,” discussed “the role of religious *faith* as a source for establishing peace rather than conflict between individuals, peoples and nations.” This lecture was presented by a Sufi Muslim. Here we see a great example of asking a non-Protestant to speak in Protestant terms. This description implies that faith is the source for establishing peace rather than actions or praxis. As a result, the Sufi lecturer was asked to describe the role of ‘religious faith’ rather than actions or praxis as the source for establishing peace. In this situation, the Sufi may understand his *faith* as something that is self-defined rather than something defined by the outside culture. However, many individuals may find difficulty in how to describe the role of ‘faith’ in building peace. I argue that this has the potential to be

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen M. Cohen and Lauren Blitzer, (2008 ), “Belonging Without Believing: Jews and Their Distinctive Patters of Religiosity and Secularity,” *Mandell L. Berman Institute North American Jewish Data Bank*, The Florence G. Heller- JCC Association Research, , 9-13.



limiting and reflective of a Protestant Christian bias for the same reasons mentioned above.

AI acknowledged this bias when dealing with non-Abrahamic traditions, but did not mention that this bias may alienate Jews or Muslims. McKee stated, “The term ‘faith traditions’ does leave Buddhism out of the conversation.”<sup>14</sup> However, I argue that this term at least limits the conversation for Jews and Muslims, if not excludes them. Inherent in the name *interfaith* is a bias that may alienate those groups who have not assimilated Protestant notions of religion into their traditions. As a result, the potential to understand the ‘other’ is limited to gaining an understanding of the ‘other’ in a Protestant Christian frame of reference.

### **The Dinner Group: Potential For a More Honest Exchange**

In the 2003-2004 year, AI introduced a second model for dialogue that involves people on a more personal and intimate level with each other. This model is called the “faith feast,” also known as the “dinner group.” AI started “faith feasts” as a way to engage participants in a more intimate conversation between lay representatives of the three traditions. The dinner groups usually consist of six couples (two couples from each of the three Abrahamic traditions) who get together and share a meal at one couple’s home once a month. The location of the dinner changes to a different couple’s home each month but the group remains the same. This group consistently meets once a month

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<sup>14</sup> Susan McKee, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, March 26, 2009.

throughout the year to develop deeper relationships and to engage with each other directly, rather than through mediation by scholars or other official representatives like in the forum model described above.

This form of dialogue has had lasting positive impacts for its participants and may be a more suitable way to conduct dialogue in order to “see what the Hindu is able to see by being a Hindu.” McKee describes the difference and freedom which exists in the dinner group that is not present in the public forum is much more engaging: “When people have to make public statements [in the forum setting], I think they tend to get more defensive about the claims about their religious tradition. The dinner group is more private.”<sup>15</sup> The small group conversation at a home, rather than in a public space, gives the opportunity for people to let down their defenses and also gives them the opportunity to make the distinction between the way they, individually, experience their religion *and* what the official stance is.

I asked Ms. McKee what kinds of topics were discussed during the dinner groups. She replied,

Every time we get together the conversation-it is sort of organic. It depends on what the group wants to talk about. The difference between formalized dialogue...and the kind of dialogue that happens within a [dinner] group that has really learned to trust each other [is that] it is of the heart, of shared experience, a more intimate kind of dialogue that breeds transformation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Susan McKee, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, April 8, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

This allowed participants to engage each other without the pressure of representing the official stance of their respective tradition. She continued, “This conversation the last time we were together [at the dinner group] about evil got into all kinds of personal theologies, as well as dogmas from the traditions. So it was a real interesting combination of sharing what the tradition says and what we individually thought about that.”<sup>17</sup> McKee claimed that this dialogue allowed each participant to begin to develop an honest relationship with the other members and to engage in conversation about themselves on a personal and individual level. Despite the more open nature of this type of dialogue, however, it is clear to see the language used by McKee is still very Protestant. The terms “dogma,” and “personal theology” are ones less likely to be understood in non-Protestant traditions. For example, scholar Julia Clancy-Smith observes, “In contrast to Christian theology, which emphasizes dogma, Judaism emphasizes law, ritual, practice, and exegesis, a concern shared by Islam as well.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the Protestant language used by McKee, this form opens up opportunities for dialogue on many levels. Meeting once a month as a small group, in a private home provides a more comfortable and informal atmosphere for dialogue.<sup>19</sup> This also raises awareness of timing in different religious traditions. For example, if the dinner group

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<sup>17</sup> Susan McKee, interview by the author, March 26, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith, “Exemplary Women in Sacred Journeys: Women and Gender in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Late Antiquity to the Eve of Modernity,” In *Women’s History in Global Perspective*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 103.

<sup>19</sup> In a way, one could argue that meeting at one family’s home does not make the space neutral. However, the hosts change with each meeting to allow for long-term neutrality, instead.

usually meets one specific weekend every month and during the spring, this weekend happens to fall in conjunction with Passover, or other timely holidays, the group may reschedule the meeting, or invite the other members for the Passover Seder.

The home can also be one of the most intimate places for a family. The home is the place where the couple sleeps, raises their children, shares meals, houses the important symbols of their religious traditions, and celebrates special occasions. Inviting a small group into one's home provides an opportunity to build trust, experience the 'other's hospitality, and provides a better opportunity for understanding both on a verbal, and non-verbal level and in their own terms. Further, at each dinner group session, each couple cooks for the group as a way of showing how their religion expresses itself in their lives. There is opportunity to ask questions about how and why the food has been prepared, what is cooked, and why it is served in such a way.<sup>20</sup> University of Denver Professor, Ginni Ishimatsu dedicates an entire course on the importance of food in religion.<sup>21</sup> This illuminates the importance of this component in understanding the 'other'.

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<sup>20</sup> The small group setting also allows for each individual to possess more of an active voice during this style of dialogue because they are competing with fewer voices than they would be at a public forum.

<sup>21</sup> In this seminar, students examine historical and anthropological perspectives on the relationship between food and religion. Food (along with drink) not only nurtures the body, but in religious contexts may also symbolize, express, and transform moral and spiritual aspects of the self. Food can serve as a medium for communication with the sacred; it may also serve as a demonstration of faith or a rejection of worldliness. In addition, communal food consumption and shared food taboos often enhance feelings of group membership in religious communities, or serve to separate and elevate some religious groups or individuals over others. In turn, religious attitudes toward food may provide normative patterns of eating and drinking, encourage the production and consumption of certain foods over others, and help shape patterns of daily living.

In the dinner group, religion becomes more than the topic of scholastic conversations about tradition, doctrine, belief, and theology. By engaging with each other in a way that is less determined by Protestant notions of 'religion', but through conversation about current events, questions about one's home and family life, and food, individuals begin to get an idea of the 'other' as he or she defines him or herself, in their own terms. In this setting there is equal representation of the three traditions, individuals have the opportunity to speak for themselves. They also serve their guests their own food, host them in their own home, talk about personal understanding of their respective religion, and how it expresses itself through their individual life. Through this, they become closer to understanding the 'other' as s/he sees him or herself.

The only topic of discussion that the dinner group participants do not talk about is the Israeli-Palestinian issue---due to its volatility. Simmons and McKee explained to me that they may have lost a member over the issue and would rather invite people to keep the focus of conversation to the "experience with the divine" rather than on volatile issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, to many people, this topic or issue may be central to the religious identities and lives of people. I discuss this topic, further, in Chapter five in my discussion of the separation of religion and politics as a Protestant notion and the drawbacks to avoiding this issue in dialogue.

**Discussion:**

The two models of dialogue that AI participates in differ greatly. In the forum style of dialogue, advertising the organization as *interfaith* and holding lectures in a

Protestant Christian Church has great implications for the potential for honest exchange for those who are engaging in dialogue. As I have shown, when an organization refers to itself as *interfaith*, this language can alienate those outside of Protestant religion. This language represents the Protestant Christian language which is not open and inviting language of everyone AI hopes to involve. This language does not allow each person to engage in their own terms and express themselves authentically. As I pointed out earlier, for many Jews and Muslims whose practice is a better gauge for their religiosity, the language of *faith*, can be problematic. The titles and explanations of the lectures color the dialogue and ask the Muslim and Christian to speak in Protestant Christian terms. For these dialogues, the Jew and Christian can begin to explain themselves in Protestant Christian terms, but it limits their ability to talk about their own experience when they are asked to speak in Protestant Christian language.

The responsibility of the board at interreligious dialogue organizations like AI needs to include being critical of the way they title and describe their lectures. In order to have an authentic exchange between individuals, room needs to be included for the individual's own expression of their religious lives, which includes appropriate language. When conversation is limited to the framework of one group, dialogue becomes ill-informed, at best. As Edward Said's<sup>22</sup> work demonstrates, not giving the space for the

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<sup>22</sup> In *Orientalism*, Said describes that misunderstandings and misinterpretation of 'Orientals' were derived from monolithic European descriptions and projections placed on the 'Orientals', which derived, not from the voices of the 'Orientals', but from European voices. For further information see chapter one of this paper and refer to Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

voices of all parties and asking them to speak in terms familiar to the Protestant does not allow participants to get a real understanding of the 'other'.

AI faces further challenges and difficulties for a productive dialogue if it continues to meet in a sacred, Protestant space. It is difficult to persuade people to come into a space that may be traditionally understood as intimidating or dangerous. For example, Jewish scholar, Jonathon Magonet points out that many Jews are apprehensive to engage in dialogue with Christians because Christians have a long tradition of attempting to convert Jews.<sup>23</sup> If the Jew with this apprehension is asked to participate in an *interfaith* dialogue, s/he becomes less likely to engage with a Protestant Christian-led organization who meets in the sacred space of a church where Christian symbols abide, and therefore, the opportunity to exchange honestly in dialogue with people who are 'others' is limited.

On the other hand, an intimate space where there is equal representation of the three different traditions, like the dinner group, may provide a less-intimidating and less-anxious environment for the non-Protestant. The opportunity to explain oneself in ways that are self-defined and host people in one's own personal space allows the individual to engage on a level independent of the official tradition. The consistent meetings once a month allow a level of trust, honesty, and relationship to develop which heightens the potential for an authentic exchange. Although the topic of Israel/Palestine has been

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathon Magonet, *Talking to the Other: Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims*, (I.B. Tauris: New York, 2003), 12-22.

deemed off-limits in the dinner groups, this model provides the potential for a more honest, open, and engaging way to understand the religious quality of an 'other's life.



**Chapter V: Face to Face: Faith to Faith: Theology-Based Dialogue and its  
Discontents**

As I have shown, the focus on authoritative texts and theological interpretation, derivative of the notion of *sola scriptura*, are foundational characteristics in Protestant religion. However, using Protestant characteristics of ‘religion’ during interreligious conversation is not always relevant to people of religious traditions outside of Christianity. The experiences of the *Face to Face: Faith to Faith* program that was started through a partnership between Seeking Common Ground, a Denver-based non-profit organization, and Auburn Theological Seminary, a large Protestant educational institution in New York, reflects the limitations that this Protestant paradigm initially posed for its participants.

**Background**

Seeking Common Ground (SCG), founded by Melodye Feldman, M.S.W., is a Denver-based organization that works with teenagers between the ages of 16-19 in communication, identity, leadership, and perspective development, and conflict resolution. Their mission is “to empower individuals to change the world by creating peaceful communities through integration, socialization, communication, and leadership

development.”<sup>1</sup> SCG seeks to create young leaders who are equipped with proper communication and leadership skills, to build a level of cultural competency that is necessary for understanding and developing relationships with the ‘other’. SCG does not define itself as an interfaith or interreligious organization; they do, however, understand the importance of religion as one component of individual identity and how it impacts one’s life. Therefore, SCG incorporates religion as one piece of their programming.

Auburn Theological Seminary (ATS) is a seminary with Presbyterian roots, founded in 1818, and based in New York. During the depression of the 1930s, ATS developed a partnership with Union Theological Seminary to assuage the economic hardship of the time. This relationship continues to the present. Today, ATS defines itself as “a seminary without borders reaching across faiths and cultures around the world”<sup>2</sup> that incorporates multi-faith understanding, leadership development, and seeks “To serve God by strengthening religious leadership.”<sup>3</sup>

In the year 2001, after a meeting between Melodye Feldman and Katharine Henderson, an ordained minister at ATS, a partnership between SCG and Auburn Theological Seminary developed to form an interfaith program called Face-to-Face/Faith to Faith that would be based in the United States. The program brought approximately forty to fifty teens from areas of conflict such as Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, South Africa and the United States together for a two-week summer-intensive. The goal of this

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<sup>1</sup> Seeking Common Ground, “About Seeking Common Ground,” [www.s-c-g.org/about.html](http://www.s-c-g.org/about.html) (accessed April 9, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Auburn Theological Seminary Website, <http://www.nyts.edu/auburn-theological-seminary> (accessed April 12, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Auburn Theological Seminary website, “About Auburn,” <http://www.auburnsem.org/about/welcome.asp?nsectionid=1&pageid=1> (accessed April 12, 2009).

program was to build a religiously diverse<sup>4</sup> community (both within and between each religious tradition) that could gain understanding of one another, while co-existing for a summer and year-long follow-up program. For example, the program sought to be able to create an environment where an Orthodox Jew who kept strict *kashrut*, or dietary laws, an observant Muslim who prayed five times a day, and an Evangelical Christian could all learn about each other and coexist in the same space.

### **Theology as the Basis of Religion**

The *Face to Face* approach was described by Melodye Feldman as strongly “interfaith.” This meant that programming focused on the ‘religious’ identities of each individual. Feldman described that most of the programming during the first year’s camp was based in theology and liturgical writings. “The programming had to be very much steeped in theology, course work [and was] very academic.”<sup>5</sup> Classes were taught by hired professional religious practitioners and teachers. Feldman described the theology was discussed mainly through the specific texts within each tradition. The writings included scriptural texts, liturgical writings, and commentary on the specific scriptures in each tradition.

The feedback received from the participants during the inaugural year showed a number of key critiques. Feldman claimed, “The kids complained that it felt like Sunday school, that there wasn’t enough inter-[group] communication, and they thought that it

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<sup>4</sup> This program was an Abrahamic program like the others. Although the community was diverse, it did not include participants from traditions outside of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

<sup>5</sup> Melodye Feldman, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, April 13, 2009.

was too theology-based. They couldn't ask the kinds of questions they wanted to because it was set up more like a classroom."<sup>6</sup>

The space of the classroom and the emphasis on theology inhibited the participants' engagement in dialogue with each other. The model of dialogue used at *Face to Face* the first year can be understood commonly as a mix between the "Dialogue in the Classroom Style" and the "Theological Exchange Model."<sup>7</sup> Scholar Jane I. Smith, has commented on the advantages and disadvantages that these models possess.<sup>8</sup> Smith argues that these can be productive models for dialogue, but each achieves different purposes. The classroom model offers youth an opportunity to engage and learn about each other in a way where they are taken more seriously than during adult dialogues. Smith observes that many young people do not have an opportunity to speak, or go unheard, in much of the adult dialogues.<sup>9</sup> The classroom format gives the opportunity for young people to learn with their peers together on a common level. The main disadvantage to this model, however, is that it is set up as a formal classroom led by the teacher or director and the opportunities for person to person engagement is limited.

The theological exchange model has had varied responses. Smith notes many feel that theology-centered dialogue is self-defeating. For example, in her research she found that the difficulty in studying theology is two-fold. Firstly, there are so many theological positions *within* each tradition that many individuals grow more confused, rather than

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<sup>6</sup> Melodye Feldman, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, April 13, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> J. I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 70.

enlightened to other religions. Secondly, others argue that individuals who are not at the clergy level, or have the proper training and understanding of their specific tradition cannot be effective on this level to speak about their respective tradition's theology.<sup>10</sup> Seyyid Hossein Nasr, an active leader in Christian-Muslim relations in the United States, comments, "It does not help the cause of Christian-Muslim dialogue if people participating in theological debates are not qualified to do so, as, unfortunately, has taken place often in the last few decades."<sup>11</sup> Nasr is alluding to the concern of propagating misinformation, or lack of information of each participant's respective *institution's* theology and understanding of the text. Feldman described that this was a genuine concern for the *Face to Face* program. Henderson felt that the participants needed to understand their respective theology so that they would not perpetuate negative or misinformation.

However, theological conversation does not always apply to every participant's life. Conversation based on each tradition's theological view transforms the participant from an individual, to a representative or ambassador of their respective institution. This brings the conversation to the institutional level, often outside the participant's actual experience and the way they live out their religious life. For example, a Catholic can talk about the institution's position on abortion or birth control theologically, but in their individual lives, the way they express their Catholicism may be quite different. It is this discrepancy between the theology and the religious quality of one's life that makes the

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<sup>10</sup> J. I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, " 72.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in J.I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*, " 72.

difference between conversation *about* religion and dialogue between individuals in interreligious conversation.

Theological conversation is also not always relevant to each participant, depending on their specific tradition. Feldman argued that this style of dialogue was not the best suited for teens at the *Face-to-Face* camp due to the diversity that existed there. “The problem with theology from an academic standpoint is that in Judaism, theology does not really play a role... You can be a Jew and not believe in God. From a Christian Protestant perspective, it was ‘We have to know our theology.’”<sup>12</sup> Although many Jews do take theology seriously, Feldman was arguing that many do not. Feldman could have been arguing for the Reconstructionist Jewish position, which makes little or no reference to God as a prerequisite for membership. Many Reconstructionist Jews would have had little to contribute to this conversation when based around theology. This comment articulates the bias that was present in the construction of the first summer program of *Face-to-Face* and the preconceived notion that ‘religion’ was largely, about theology.

This is an example of Protestantism becoming the gauge for understanding ‘religion’. Brown, in *The Spirit of Protestantism* illustrates the importance of theology and how it is central to the expression of Protestant religion:

If theology is faith seeking understanding, then no one is exempted from the demand that he seek to understand the faith that is in him...faith is so important to the Protestant that he could not possibly let someone else take final responsibility for what he believed.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Melodye Feldman, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, April 13, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, (Oxford University Press: London, 1965), 119.

Understanding God and one's individual faith in mind and spirit is central to 'religion' in the Protestant tradition. From a Protestant perspective, constructing a program based on understanding each tradition's theological tradition would be essential in understanding their 'religion'. Brown continues, "[The Protestant's] options are never, 'Shall I be a theologian or not?' They are *only*, 'Will I be a good theologian or a bad one (emphasis added).'"<sup>14</sup> The use of theology as the indicator for 'religion' in the *Face to Face* program supports my theory that the dominant tradition's (Protestantism) foundations have influenced the overall conception of 'religion' in the United States, and has gone largely unnoticed and unquestioned in dialogue programs.

In reality, the participants' understanding was not only limited to speak about their respective tradition's theology (if they had one), but they also found it less relevant to their lives. Feldman was able to see that this type of dialogue was not fitting for all the participants. For Jews, many Muslims, as I have described earlier, more emphasis in their respective traditions is placed on the practice and actions performed through their tradition, rather than on the theology or faith that goes along with their tradition. In other words, the praxis is a better descriptor of what the religious quality of a Jew or a Muslim's life is. It would be a more authentic telling of the religious life to the 'other' if the focus lay in these parts or aspects of their traditions.

Another critique that the participants gave at the end of the program was that 'religion' seemed to be separated from "everything else." Outside of the classroom, during other activities and workshops, there was little talk about religion or the religious activities of each participant and group. Feldman described the dialogue sessions and

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<sup>14</sup> MacAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, 119.

intentional listening exercises the first summer, left religion out of the topics of conversation. This was difficult for the participants because many wanted to understand how religion was involved in their respective community's conflict. Feldman further described that many others wanted to understand why and how the symbols and languages of each tradition caused fear between the groups. For example, some wanted to deal with issues such as why an Israeli Jew becomes afraid when s/he sees a Muslim praying.<sup>15</sup>

These missed opportunities left many participants with a sense of a disconnectedness to the reality of their everyday lives in that first year's program. This disconnection also left the participants with an understanding that their religious identities were something compartmentalized or separate from the rest of their normal, everyday lives. Theology relies on mind, faith, and understanding with the head or brain; it relies on something entirely internal.<sup>16</sup> The participants left the summer camp understanding that 'religion' was limited to their respective theology, and something that one does internally. This left out how their traditions shaped their perceptions of the world, the way they interacted with each other, the food they ate, the clothes they may have worn, and why they conduct their lives in specific ways.

In the classroom setting, limiting the focus of 'religion' to theology and texts left the participants unsettled and wanting. But for the *Face to Face* program, initially, this seemed like the necessary step to gaining an understanding of the 'others' in the program.

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<sup>15</sup> Melodye Feldman, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, April 13, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Malorye Nye describes that Protestant religion is based on internal belief. However, there is a complex relationship between belief and practice. Brown argues that belief is a form of action, but simply, an internal action rather than an external, observable action. For more information, see Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, 113-114, and Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, 59-63.



Edward Said's work reminds us that when we look at others through our own frame of reference, it tells us more about ourselves, than the other. Here we see that the *Face to Face* program, however well-intentioned, centered much of their programming on the Protestant characteristic of 'religion' by focusing on the theology in each tradition rather than incorporating other facets of religious practice and the way it shapes the actual day-to-day lives of the participants.

### **The Question of Politics in Interreligious Dialogue**

Because of the apparent disconnect described above, the programming shifted the second and subsequent summers of *Face to Face*, better integrating the religious symbolism and practice of each tradition. *Face to Face*, now included intentional listening exercises, dialogue groups, and leadership training in intergroup projects in religion, broadly defined, which included *kashrut* and *halal* food preparations, prayer practices, and symbols within each tradition.

However, even after the change, Feldman still was not completely satisfied with the direction and programming of the *Face to Face* program. She described that programming was based on the common characteristics and values among the groups, and shied away from the differences. She argued that without having the difficult conversations about difference, a dialogue or intergroup activity did not really achieve understanding of the 'other'. She observed,

[We] had to talk about similarities and did not explore the true depth of text, liturgy and the differences that divided the communities. [We should have] look[ed] at what Christianity has written through the ages [like] the Easter liturgy

that can be read as [anti-Jewish], Muslims with their *fatwas*. [We needed to ask] what are the interpretations?<sup>17</sup>

Feldman argued that the difference between a positive, transforming dialogue and a simple interaction with one another is the ability to have these difficult conversations. It was necessary to have these conversations, especially, if the program was going to be centered on developing communication and resolving conflict in an interethnic and interreligious environment. Feldman believes that this is the only way to move toward a true understanding of the ‘other’. Feldman believes that one is only gaining an understanding of the ‘other’ when s/he can understand what is different about him or her, especially when it defies one’s own position or character.

Salam al-Mariati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council of Los Angeles, and an American Muslim, agrees. He points out, “The devil is in the details...Dialogue tends to spiral down to the encapsulation of our social fears, contradictions, and biases...or to float in the clouds of platitudinous mutual complements of the other. We must find a better way to proceed.”<sup>18</sup> al-Mariati, Feldman, and Mbembe are describing a “middle path,” or the necessity for honesty in the middle of fear and rejection on the one hand, and blissful complements on the other. It is not possible to have a transformative dialogue that never breaks beyond similarities and the “easy” commonalities and conversations that center on monotheism, joint genealogy to the patriarch Abraham, and/or approaching common community needs.

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<sup>17</sup> Melodye Feldman, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, April 13, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Salam al-Mariati, “Christian-Muslim Relations in North America: An Activist’s Perspective,” *The Muslim World*, 94, July 2004.

Characteristically, one of the only topics that is deemed “off-limits” in much of interfaith and interreligious dialogue is the topic of Israel/Palestine, or commonly referred to as, “land issues.” Both, the Colorado Muslim Society and the Abrahamic Initiative described avoiding this topic, and sometimes, not acknowledging its existence at all as something relevant to “religious” conversation. Is this because Israel/Palestine is a political matter rather than a religious matter? The answer may depend on who is determining what is political and what is religious, or if a separation even exists between the two. As I have pointed out before, this separation is largely a Protestant notion. In a recent New York Times article following the recent Israel-Gaza war, an Israeli soldier claimed,

We are the Jewish people, we came to this land by a miracle, God brought us back to this land and now we need to fight to expel the non-Jews who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land. This was the main message, and the whole sense many soldiers had in this operation was of a religious war.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, to this religious nationalist Israeli soldier, the “land issue” in Israel/Palestine *is* a religious issue. Others, like Dr. Hamdi, would disagree and say that talking about Israel/Palestine is a political issue, and is not appropriate for a conversation *about* Islam or religion. But for many people, there is religious significance to this conflict. One can be a religious Zionist, a pacifist Christian who does not believe in violence due to his or her Christian ethics and tradition, or a Muslim who considers him or herself a part of the global Islamic *umma* which maintains a spiritual connection to all Muslims. To all three of these individuals, an argument could be made that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, in fact, a ‘religious’ concern or issue.

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<sup>19</sup> Ethan Bronner, “A Religious War in Israel’s Army,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2009, WK1.

What happens to our dialogue, for example, if we do not include the Israel/Palestine issue or other “land issues” in our conversation about religion? Are we installing an additional impediment to dialogue? Feldman critiques much of the current interreligious and interfaith dialogue that omits this issue:

Christians, Muslims, and Jews [who] talk about religion without the politics-it becomes inauthentic... If you don't talk about [Israel/Palestine], there is a whole big elephant in the room, [and] it's never going to be authentic because something is off limits. [Israel/Palestine] can't be off limits. If that relationship [in dialogue] never goes to the more difficult areas, are they real relationships? Do you talk about Jihad, do you talk about conquering? If [not talking about these issues] prevents us from harming the other person, then that's great...but the reality is, when there is a bombing, a war that breaks out in Israel, people go back to their respective communities, and back to their sides. Part of [the goal of] dialogue is to go back into your community and say, you know what, 'I don't see it that way anymore because of this experience'. But if you are not talking politics, you are not going to those hard places, it doesn't do much.<sup>20</sup>

The significance of Feldman's point lies in the question of who defines the limits of religious conversation and the implications thereof. If we are interested in learning and understanding “what the Hindu is able to see by being a Hindu,” than we cannot leave out the religious significance many feel about this issue simply because it is volatile. I, like Feldman, question the efficacy and result of dialogue that dismisses these difficult issues. By neglecting or shying away from this topic, the religious nationalist Israeli soldier is alienated from the conversation, along with the Christian, the Muslim, and any other who perceives religious significance inherent in this issue. In this situation where we deny the opportunity for someone to speak about their relation to this conflict, the dialogue changes from a safe space where one can express the religious quality of their life to a confined conversation where certain groups are alienated and disenfranchised.

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<sup>20</sup> Melodye Feldman, interview by the author, Denver, Colorado, April 13, 2009.

In conclusion, the *Face to Face* program decided to change their methodology and model for dialogue after the first summer because it left the participants with a lack of connection to their actual lives. This suggests that ‘religious’ programming that relies on theology-based classes is less-suited for some traditions than others. Feldman saw the need to extend religion beyond theology and incorporate other forms of ‘religion’ that occur in traditions outside of Christianity after the first summer. Further, this suggests that a more conducive way to conduct interreligious dialogue would be to extend our conceptions of ‘religion’ beyond each tradition’s theology and doctrine, *and* to include discussing differences, particularly, politics, conduct, and practices.

The *Face to Face* program was designed to develop young leaders who would possess the skills and training to be able to listen to one another, understand each other’s perspective and gain sympathy for viewpoints outside of their own so that they will become leaders of peace in their communities. The participants came from areas of conflict like South Africa, Northern Ireland, and Israel/Palestine. In order to train individuals to be real activists and leaders in conflict resolution in their communities, it is important to know how to engage in difficult conversations with the ‘other’. The results of the program proved to be more successful in the years following the change in programming, but Feldman argues that the conversation still does not reach a point of transformation without engaging these real differences. Limiting conversation by excluding politics and differences that exist between each group is only superficial. If dialogue is meant to be a means for resolving conflict and learning how to understand the ‘other’, we will not begin to understand the religious quality of one’s life without discussing these difficult topics.

Without discussing the way that ‘religion’ interacts with our social and historical environment, it remains something outside of us and not something that is authentic to the actual lives of the participants. Malory Nye points out that “As a human activity, the analysis of religion and culture is simultaneously an analysis of gender, ethnicity and other social relations and categories...Religious differences are in turn, a product of (and also produce) power relations.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is essential that we talk about religion in conjunction with culture, history, and power relations. Further, if the study of religion is the study of culture, then it is important to include conflicts that exist within societies and individuals. For example, a Jewish Israeli will describe their experience of Judaism differently than other Jews living in Baghdad, New York, Chicago, or Moscow because the surrounding culture carries with it different history, norms, language, and values that help to create each individual’s particular form of ‘religion’. Therefore, to talk about what it means to be Jewish carries with it many different meanings in all of these situations. Without these interacting forces included in dialogue about ‘religion’, we are not coming to terms with the authentic religious quality of the ‘other’s’ life.

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<sup>21</sup> Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 208.

## **Toward an Authentic Exchange with the ‘Other’: Future Prospects and Conclusion**

“Affinity is based on likeness and true community begins with acceptance of otherness.”<sup>1</sup>

I have argued that religious traditions like Judaism and Islam that traditionally emphasize characteristics other than Protestant ones, such as ritual, practice, and the laws of their respective traditions do not have the same opportunity to describe their ‘religious’ lives when belief (or faith), theology, and authoritative texts are presumed to be the central characteristics of ‘religion’. As I have mentioned, these religious traditions *do* contain authoritative texts and elements of belief or faith. However, these characteristics constitute only one part of a religion, and do not always lie at the heart of the religious quality of one’s life. I have argued that these elements have been highlighted in religious conversation as a result of the Protestant Christian paradigm that exists in the United States. This limits the conversation to central elements of Protestant Christianity, rather than including opportunities for all participants to describe the religious qualities outside of this framework which help define their religious life. I have shown that in all three organizations, each contained Protestant Christian tendencies in the way they have

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Friedman, “The Dialogue of Touchstone as an Approach to Interreligious Dialogue,” In *Dialogue and Syncretism*, ed. Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout, Anton Wessels, (Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1989), 79.

framed or conducted dialogue. As a result, they possess inherent challenges to honest dialogue between individuals of different traditions.

In the Colorado Muslim Society's dialogue, the Protestant biases were not as explicit, but still present. I found that the larger social and political effects of the events of September 11 have created different priorities for Muslims engaging in dialogue at CMS. Rather than seeking to understand the 'other' on his or her individual terms, Muslims at the Colorado Muslim Society have made the priority of dialogue to counter media depictions of Muslims and informing non-Muslims about Islam. They believe this has become a necessary action toward the survival and integration of the Muslim community into the Denver community at large. As a result, they have engaged with members of Denver, who tend to be largely Christian, in order to present Islam in a non-threatening light to this majority. I have argued this dialogue is still colored by is the Protestant Christian paradigm, where Christians lead the interactive question and answer conversation, following the presentation about Islam. This continues to be geared toward the Christian audience and limits both parties' understanding of Islam, and each other, through these narrow conversations about 'religion'.

In the Abrahamic Initiative, I found that the term, *interfaith* may provide difficulty in recruitment of people from other religious traditions who do not consider faith to be the most important part of their respective religious lives as Protestants do. Further, housing dialogue in a Protestant Christian church between groups that have historically been at odds with Christianity also makes it difficult to create a safe space for participants willing to engage to be honest and engaging.



I have also illustrated in the *Face to Face* program those emphases on theology in the programming that left participants feeling unable to engage each other's actual religious lives because theology was not as relevant to them, and the classroom style did not allow for comfortable engagement. The organization has since changed their programming to allow for additional activities and outlets to describe and discuss the religious lives of their participants. For the inaugural summer, *Face to Face* saw this as the most natural way to learn about another's 'religion' which proved to be limiting for the participants.

All three organizations limited their discussion of politics due to its volatility, or because politics was not a part of 'religion'. The *Face to Face* program limited their discussion of 'religion' by not engaging in differences and in 'political' issues. However, if we do not engage in these issues, we do not get a true understanding of the 'other's' religious quality of life. Many people view these political issues as central to their religious lives. In order to be open and welcoming, it is important to keep these issues on the table for conversation.<sup>2</sup>

These findings point to a larger problem that we, as a nation have not approached responsibly. This problem, of course, is what J.Z. Smith has pointed out in the past: that religion *can* be defined over fifty different ways. As such, we need to recognize that 'religion' is not a *sui generis* term, or a term that remains by itself, unique, and unattached to other parts of the human experience. One's religious life happens in contemporary and real time, as individuals who are *part* of a tradition, and not the

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<sup>2</sup> Melodye Feldman's therapeutic background as a social worker admonishes that it takes a trained facilitator or moderator to facilitate discussions of volatility. This process also takes time and trust-building for such engagement to take place. However, she believes that discussing these topics is possible and necessary for successful dialogue.

embodiment of that tradition. As a result, religion is interconnected and expressed in all other components of life. It begins and ends at no single point. When engaging in interreligious dialogue, therefore, we need to include elements of history, culture, politics, and power relations in order to be able to describe the ‘religious’ quality of our lives, rather than using terms that confine conversation within the Protestant discourse. For interreligious dialogue to be a successful endeavor, ‘religious’ conversation needs to be open to over fifty different definitions and forms.

The goal of my research was to contribute to the continuing conversation related to the efficacy of interreligious dialogue. I strived to question the underlying assumptions about ‘religion’ that exist in the American imagination and how these limit dialogue between groups. This conversation is becoming increasingly important to the study of religion, American and global conflict, and relating in an increasingly globalizing world. Much of the previous research has critiqued different models of dialogue, but most do not attempt to critique the underlying assumptions held about ‘religion’, and how they shape the conversation. I have ventured to answer this one question in this essay.

It is essential to recognize the uniqueness and multiplicities that exist in each person whom we meet during dialogue. A step toward this kind of honest dialogue is only possible through challenging, and moving beyond, the biases that underlie our preconceptions of ‘religion’ in order to create a space and discourse where people can engage with each other in their own terms.

It is clear that we need to extend our understandings beyond this Protestant Christian notion of 'religion' if we want to have a more authentic exchange between individuals. To return to J.Z. Smith's quotation with which I started this paper,

The moral...is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways... 'Religion' is not a native term...It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' in anthropology.<sup>3</sup>

Smith's remarks are essential for us to remember in our approach to interreligious dialogue. Religion *can* be defined in fifty different ways. If we limit the conversation to Protestant Christian conceptions of 'religion' which center on text, theology, and belief, we will not get an understanding of "what the Hindu is able to see by being a Hindu," and may alienate those with whom we might otherwise engage. Rather, we should strive to extend the conversation to include other characteristics and definitions of 'religion' present in non-Christian traditions so that we may enter into understanding the religious quality of the 'other's' life.

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<sup>3</sup> J.Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 281-282.

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## **Appendix A: Steps for Further Research**

Further insight on the impact of the Protestant paradigm in interreligious dialogue could be gained from interviewing current participants in these specific programs. For the purposes of this study, I was particularly interested in understanding how different organizations framed their dialogue as well as the language that the organization used to describe their programming. However, hearing testimonials from individual participants describing their experience of dialogue in the United States could foster further insight and clarity into the specific limitations of working in a Protestant Christian paradigm.

Another opportunity for further research would begin investigating who, specifically from each religious tradition, is engaging in dialogue. As I have shown, there are currently Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Christians participating in dialogue. One could ask, if they are being asked to express themselves in a foreign way, why do they continue to engage in dialogue?

There is research to show that as non-Christian groups become incorporated into the American mainstream, the expression of that tradition takes on Protestant characteristics.<sup>1</sup> For example, scholar Yvonne Haddad points out that in traditional Islam, Imams' responsibilities are limited to interpreting Qur'anic law and leading

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<sup>1</sup> See Yvonne Haddad, "A Century of Islam in America," *Hamdard Islamicus*, 21, 4, (1997), 1-8. Also see Bernard Lazerwitz and Michael Harrison, "American Jewish Denominations: A Social and Religious Profile," *American Sociological Review*, 44, 4, (August 1979), 656-666.

prayers. In the United States, on the other hand, more Imams are taking on counseling roles, similar to those of Protestant clergy. Similarly, in Judaism, many reform synagogues have taken on the shape and character of Protestant churches. Instead of being located in the middle of the congregation, the ark which houses the Torah will most likely be in the front of the room, sometimes on a stage. The rabbi will preach from a pulpit near the ark similarly to the position and organization of a Protestant church.

These small examples may be representative of the “Protestantization” of non-Protestant traditions in America, and pose an interesting question for our study of interreligious dialogue and understanding the ‘other’ in their own terms. A future study could investigate whether non-Protestants participating in dialogue come from more “Protestantized,” or “Americanized” versions of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. As I described earlier, a distinction between “Protestant” and “American” forms of religion is notoriously difficult to make. This study could also give insight into why so many non-Protestants are engaging in dialogue. Conversely, this study may also provide information into which sects of each tradition are *not* engaging in dialogue and why. From this section of the study, we may be able to better understand how to further extend and open the language that we use to frame and engage in dialogue with the ‘other’. This study could also further investigate the elusive line between “American” culture and its effects on these other religious traditions, or whether this is a “Protestant” effect on other traditions, and where this line may start and stop. I have pointed out earlier that this is a very difficult line to uncover because of the close interaction, both historically and contemporaneously between the two.



A third issue for future research would be to explore dialogues in non-Western countries to compare and contrast the biases that may exist in other dialogues. For example, does dialogue in Jordan reflect a Muslim-biased conception of 'religion'? There has been an increase in dialogue throughout the world, but very little research has been done in non-Western countries to critique it. It could provide further insight into dialogue for organizations all over the world due to the increasingly globalizing nature of the world.

## **Appendix B: Practical Insights for A More Authentic Exchange**

When I first set out to write this paper, I sought to address the Protestant Christian biases that exist in much of the interreligious dialogue that takes place in the United States. If I were to stop there, I would not feel like I would have done anything but simply critique dialogue without posing some possibilities for change. Throughout my research and as an intern at Seeking Common Ground (SCG), I have gained experience in leading and refining dialogue groups and sessions in a slightly different context than the interreligious or interfaith setting that I have commented on thus far. I offer in this appendix, tips for more egalitarian dialogue and a practical exercise that may be useful in assuaging the Protestant Christian biases that have limited other dialogues.

Some could argue that the alternative to confining religious conversation is to discuss anything that comes to mind. This is not what I am advocating. I am advocating that interreligious dialogue be defined and structured in a way that gives each participant the opportunity to express to the ‘other’ what it means to be ‘religious’. In order to maintain openness to different definitions of ‘religion’ in an organization, it is important to have diverse representation on the steering committee or board that directs programming. By including people from all different backgrounds, the potential for working in a limited framework is narrowed. One way to recruit additional members is to engage in community action projects that have common concern for the different

religious communities that are present in a specific neighborhood in order to begin a relationship. This is the way many dialogue organizations approach interreligious work, in general. For example, having an event to clean up a public space shared by all in the community can have a lasting impact and allow relationships to be built. From these relationships, people grow to know one another and may become interested in working together on a project like interreligious dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

It is also necessary to create a safe space where people feel comfortable explaining how their religion expresses itself in many, or all parts of their individual lives. One option that an organization could take would be to alternate the location of each session of dialogue to other holy places. For example, have one forum at a church, another at the mosque or Islamic Center where participants of dialogue attend, followed by a final forum at a Jewish synagogue. This would provide the opportunity to maintain long-term neutrality, similar to the dinner groups, while assuaging the financial burden that many groups face. Another option could include having dialogue at a non-religious space like a coffee shop or similar venue.

A third tip for improvement for dialogue would be to add, “Sensitivity to uni-religious language,” as a ground rule. As I pointed out, language is very important when creating a safe space for participants. This ground rule can include a set of examples which may include, but is not limited to, “Making sure to use the term, ‘religious tradition’ rather than ‘faith group’ or ‘faith tradition’.” This set of rules should be placed somewhere visible to all participants everywhere dialogues are held. It would also be

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<sup>2</sup> A stumbling block may be finding an appropriate day during the week for each religious community. The Sabbath falls on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, respectively for Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. One might consider forming an early evening clean-up two or three days during the week.

wise to introduce dialogue with the ground rules each time so people who have not attended are aware of the space and what the organization is attempting to gain.

In addition, it has become poignant in my work at SCG and my research that teens have a lot to offer dialogue. As we found above, it was the feedback from the teens that led to a change in the *Face to Face* program. This is another clear example of how important it is to the efficacy of dialogue to allow the voices of those participating in the evaluation and future programming. Many times, as adults the insight from the younger, less confined teens is necessary to open up different perspectives and possibilities for dialogue. Seriously including young people in dialogue and listening to their proposals for change heightens the experience for everyone.

Finally, after this research, I have been persuaded about the efficacy and transformation that is possible in the dinner group model for a number of reasons. Many of the organizations with whom I spoke cited the issue of the difficult position clergy find themselves when attempting to engage in an authentic dialogue. Clergy have difficulty representing their own religious life when political pressure exists to express the tradition's official stances on religious life. In the dinner group model, the individual is acknowledged as such, even if he or she happens to be a clergy person. This will allow for a more authentic exchange between 'other's which does not leave the clergy outside of the conversation. Also, as I mentioned before, the dinner group provides new and experiential understanding of each different religious tradition. For example, having dialogue in an orthodox Jewish home would allow participants to see the separation of dishes for meat and dairy, and many other forms of religious praxis that takes place in the home.

## **Intentional Listening**

Seeking Common Ground's programming is largely focused around the concept of communication and dialogue in order to achieve their goals. Intentional listening is an exercise used during SCG's flagship program, *Building Bridges for Peace*, which was started in 1994 as a program to bring together young adults who describe themselves as Jewish-Israeli, Arab-Israeli, Palestinian, and American, together to have people from conflicted areas begin to understand the 'other', in a direct way.

In this exercise, two participants engage in a practice in patience, integrity and empathy. The exercise takes place with a third facilitator whose job it is to ensure that the conversation remains within the rules of the exercise. Participant A is asked to describe something that is bothering them or an issue that they would like to bring up to Participant B. This can include anything that the participant would like to address. Without interruption, Participant B listens for about thirty seconds or so and then repeats back to Participant A what they have heard. The facilitator gently stops Participant A after about thirty seconds of speaking. Participant B is then asked to repeat back to Participant A exactly what s/he heard and not to add to, or say anything outside of what was said by Participant A. If Participant B adds or changes any of the words, the facilitator will step in and ask Participant A to clarify to Participant B what s/he originally said. This includes specific language, ideas, and concepts that often are contradictory to what person B thinks or feels.<sup>3</sup> This will be repeated a number of times before the final step.

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<sup>3</sup> With participants who come from a place of conflict and contested space like Israel/Palestine, language plays a vital role in each group's perspective. For example, an Israeli, when playing the role of Participant

At the end of the exercise, Participant B will sum up all that s/he has heard from Participant A and will end the summary with the phrase, “Given all that I have heard, that must make you feel...”<sup>4</sup> This is the important point at which Participant B starts to gain empathy for Participant A. Participant B has taken the mirroring exercise one step further where s/he imagines what Participant A is feeling as a result of what has been said by Participant A. Through this exercise, each participant begins to recognize the humanity in the ‘other’ and consciously, Participant B has to go one step beyond just listening, and envisions him or herself in Participant A’s shoes. At the end of Participant B’s empathy statement, s/he asks Participant A if it was a correct statement of the way in which Participant A must be feeling. This position of Participant A and B are exchanged at different times throughout the program.

This is very difficult for the participants and can be a very slow and drawn out process, but has proved to provide positive results in self awareness, validation, and most importantly, empathy between participants with such vast differences. Breeze and Feldman point out,

By teaching intentional listening and dialogical processes, participants are able to address difficult and emotional topics with more comfort...Participants interviewed for this report talked about their new ability to listen and, therefore, to understand the ‘other’ more deeply. This resulted in them becoming more open to alternative perspectives and more invested in their relationships with one another.<sup>5</sup>

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B, may have to repeat back to Participant A, and refer to the land on the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean as “Palestine,” instead of “Israel” and vice versa.

<sup>4</sup> One could change “that must make you feel” to “that must be important to you because...” or other variations depending on the topic of conversation.

<sup>5</sup> Erin Elizabeth Breeze and Melodye Feldman, *Building Bridges for Peace: An Intergroup Intervention for Israeli, Palestinian, and American Teens*, (Denver, Colorado: Seeking Common Ground, 2008), 89.

This method of intentional listening allows each individual to represent an issue, thought, idea or need in his or her own terms, rather than in terms described by the dominant group. The three elements of “mirroring, validating, and empathizing” are apparent in this exercise. The importance of speaking in one’s own terms and hearing back what one has said gives validation to the individual in the position of Participant A. At the same time, this exercise gives each individual the space, time, and attention that are necessary to start to see what Participant A sees by being Participant A, or in our case, “what the Hindu is able to see by being a Hindu.” This also allows for the listener, or participant B, to start to consider how the ‘other’ feels, gaining sympathy and possibly, empathy, for the ‘other’, even though they may strongly disagree with the content that led to the feeling. Here, the participants start to recognize the common humanity in each other, rather than simply fight about who is right and who is wrong, or disputing truth claims.

This type of exercise could be appropriate for interreligious dialogue when the goal is to understand how each person sees the world through the lens of their particular religious tradition rather than through a Protestant lens. In the example above, Participant A is usually describing a problem or an issue of conflict or contention with an ‘other’. However, this type of exercise could be used in interreligious dialogue. For example, the initial question could start off in an open-ended way like, “Describe something about your religion that you would like to share with the group (or, with Participant B).” This type of question invites the participant to answer in the way that s/he sees fit. S/he may decide to answer this in a way that expresses something about the law or practice of their tradition, a belief, a decision s/he has made at some point in his or

her life, what they had for dinner, social norms, their children, or a plethora of other responses.