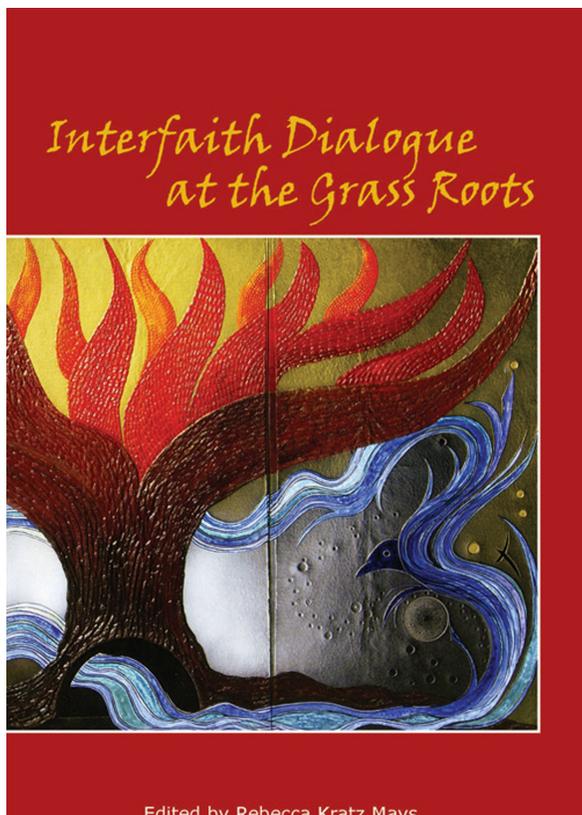


# Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots

Edited by Rebecca Kratz Mays



A wonderful resource for religious leaders and faith communities, this volume offers down-to-earth guidance for interreligious dialogue in a variety of grassroots settings. Leading Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scholars and activists share their wisdom and stories, discussion questions and action suggestions. Great for use by individuals, study groups, classes and more.

**Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots** is published by Ecumenical Press of The Dialog Institute at Temple University. The Dialog Institute conducts academic conferences, facilitates training, and sponsors projects in interreligious dialogue around the globe.

#### Editor:

Rebecca Kratz Mays is a Quaker teacher and editor with a B.A. from Earlham College and an M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania. For ten years, she taught "Approaching the Gospels Together" at the Quaker adult study center, Pendle Hill, near Philadelphia, PA, and for twenty years she edited and managed Pendle Hill books and pamphlets. Currently, she is on the staff of The Dialog Institute at Temple University where she is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Religious Studies with an emphasis on interreligious dialogue.

#### Contributors:

S. Mark Heim, Maria Hornung, Edith Howe, Michael S. Kogan, April Kunze, Rebecca Kratz Mays, Khaleel Mohammed, Achmad Munjid, Eboo Patel, Marcia Prager, Noah Silverman, Leonard Swidler, Racelle Weiman, and Miriam Therese Winter.

"... **Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots** answers a common question in a concrete way: 'Is interfaith dialogue only for religious leaders and scholars?' The answer is, 'No – it's a movement that everyone can and should participate in.' The pieces in Mays' volume are examples of interfaith work in a variety of ways and in a range of contexts, from the United States to Macedonia to Indonesia. The pieces are well-written and introduced by one of the most important scholars in the field, Leonard Swidler."

— Eboo Patel, *In Faith*, Newsweek.WashingtonPost.com

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Edited by Rebecca Kratz Mays

Ecumenical Press; The Dialog Institute at Temple University

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## What People Are Saying

*The grassroots encounters guided by this book can have a global impact. With so many forces seeking to heighten inter- and intra-religious tension around the world, it is vital that we Americans use the precious opportunity of living in our unique democracy to enhance understanding instead. This requires addressing points of connection as well as points of division—a complex dance that this remarkable collection helps choreograph.*

—**Zainab Al-Suwaij**, Executive Director, American Islamic Congress

••

*Not only is it inspirational, but this book will be put to good use to enthuse and enable people of faith to engage with one another at the grassroots level—where it really counts.*

—**Rabbi Reuven Firestone**, Professor of Judaism and Islam, Hebrew Union College and Co-Director of the Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement

••

*A rich resource for those in or who want to be in Abrahamic dialogues. A “how to” conduct dialogues that at the same time reflects the collective wisdom of its contributors, challenging the reader with new insights and perspectives. Invaluable for clergy or laity.*

—**Dr. Eugene J. Fisher**, Associate Director Emeritus, Secretariat for Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

••

*In a world threatened by violence of the worst kind, violence carried out in the name of God, an amazing book has appeared that is at once instructive, inspiring, hopeful, and practical. It invites us all to see that life is fundamentally a dialogue, a conversation, and it illumines some of the ways in which that conversation can be made a blessing to everyone in our communities. Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots is a “must read.”*

—**The Rev. Dr. V. Bruce Rigdon**, President Emeritus, Ecumenical Theological Seminary

## About The Dialogue Institute

**The Dialogue Institute** leads and sustains a movement of interreligious and intercultural dialogue within an academic setting, on a global scale. It draws its energy from intellectual inquiry, critical thinking and open exchange, enjoying its unique position on the urban campus of a secular public university. The Dialogue Institute works collaboratively with other universities, non-governmental organizations, and the business and public sectors and aims at creating an atmosphere of trust and fostering knowledge and mutual understanding in a global context.

Based at Temple University in Philadelphia, our work focuses in six primary areas:

- Interreligious dialogue training. The Dialogue Institute trains groups of scholars and professionals in the philosophy and methodologies of interreligious dialogue. Seminars of varying lengths afford participants hands-on learning and practice in dialogue, as well as the opportunity to experience the rich heritage of interreligious engagement present in the history and social fiber of Philadelphia.
- International networking and program development. Through the Dialogue Institutes Network, (DIN) the Dialogue Institute provides support, mentoring and access to Centers/Institutes committed to promoting interreligious dialogue in their diverse contexts, from Bangladesh to Romania to Myanmar and Indonesia. The Dialogue Institute is establishing an interreligious resource database to help connect and encourage struggling new academic centers worldwide.
- Muslim-Jewish-Christian dialogue seminars, projects and conferences. Since 1978, the Dialogue Institute has sponsored the International Scholars' Abrahamic Dialogue (ISAT). These conferences bring together leading scholars from each of the Abrahamic faiths in in-depth round tables in regions where interreligious understanding is crucial to promote stability and peace. These retreat and conference opportunities allow academics and leaders to pursue serious research and application for communities in crisis. The ISAT generates a process to acknowledge and reward excellence in this field and seeks role models and recognizable achievement in methodology and performance. The next Dialogue will be held in Amman, Jordan in May 2008 and will focus on interreligious cooperation in relation to socially responsible global business.
- Resource Development and Distribution. The Interreligious Literacy Project provides quality religious and interreligious resources to the libraries of seminaries, universities, faith communities, and interreligious institutes in the developing world. Linking sponsoring communities to committed participants, the Interreligious Literacy Project also promotes dialogue through establishing community-to-community relationships across national, cultural, and religious boundaries. This effort includes the development of trustworthy materials (audio-visuals, exhibits, educational projects) in interreligious dialogue, and also identifies, evaluates and promotes materials from other sources.
- Advancement of Interreligious Scholarship. In partnership with the Religion Department of Temple University, the Dialogue Institute offers graduate courses and opportunity for independent study in the area of Interreligious Dialogue. Graduate student Interns and Associates from many contexts contribute original research and produce new resources to further interreligious understanding and action. This includes outreach and interface with other academic disciplines in Business, Science, Medicine, Art, and Communications in the field of global ethics. This mentorship of graduate students is designed to create a cadre of new scholars in Interreligious Dialogue for this century.
- Promote awareness and action on behalf of religious freedom. Conscience Matters is a global initiative that will help clarify and describe international events where religions or religious individuals are threatened or in peril, and assist in their plight through various avenues, particularly in the realm of

dialogue, mediation and conflict resolution. The mobilization of action takes many forms, including the translation of texts and the creation and circulation of joint documents and laws regarding human dignity.

**LEONARD SWIDLER** is Founder and President of the Dialogue Institute, as well as Founding Editor of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. He is Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue in the Religion Department of Temple University, where he has taught since 1966.

At Temple, and as a visiting professor at universities around the world – including Graz, Austria; Tübingen, Germany; Fudan University, Shanghai; and the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur – Prof. Swidler has mentored a generation of U.S. and international scholars in the work of interreligious dialogue. Prof. Swidler has a Licentiate in Sacred Theology from the University of Tübingen, and received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Wisconsin; he also holds honorary doctorates from St. Norbert's College and LaSalle University.

Prof. Swidler has published more than 180 articles and 70 books, including: *Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (1978); *Religious Liberty and Human Rights* (1986); *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (1990); *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (1990); *Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Dialogue over a Generation* (1992); *Jesus Was a Feminist* (2007).

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**Leonard Swidler** is Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue in the Religion Department at Temple University, where he has taught since 1966. He is Founder and President of the Dialogue Institute (Interreligious, Intercultural, International), as well as founding editor, together with his wife Arlene, of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. At Temple, and as a visiting professor at universities around the world—including Graz, Austria; Tübingen, Germany; Fudan University, Shanghai; and the University of Malaya, *Introduction 7* Kuala Lumpur—Swidler has mentored a generation of U.S. and international scholars in the work of interreligious dialogue. He holds degrees in history, philosophy, and theology from Marquette University (M.A.), Tübingen University (S.T.L.) and the University of Wisconsin (Ph.D.). Swidler has published more than 180 articles and 70 books, including: *Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (1978); *Religious Liberty and Human Rights* (1986); *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (1990); *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (1990); *Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Dialogue over a Generation* (1992); and *Triologue: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Dialogue* (co-edited with K. Durán and R. Firestone) (2007).

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## From the Introduction

Forty religious seekers filled the worship room in the converted barn at Pendle Hill, the Quaker study center in Pennsylvania near Philadelphia. Rabbi Marcia Prager and I sat attentive to each person present as we read a verse from the Genesis creation story, interpreting its meaning from our Jewish and Christian perspectives. “God said: Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). We paused to consider the plural pronouns in the passage; Marcia offered commentary from the rabbinical tradition. We then entered into silence for others to speak. A Christian Quaker pastor from Kenya rose slowly to his feet. With respect for the diverse faith perspectives in our group, he spoke with reverence for his tradition and experience. He identified Jesus, as God’s companion in creation, saying with God, “Let us make humankind in our image ...”

Encounters such as this one have become more and more commonplace in our pluralistic world. More than ever before, people now live and work with members of other religious traditions. With the click of a computer mouse, we are up close to “the other,” the person who is unfamiliar or the custom that we don’t understand.

Religious congregations are increasingly seeking to engage others in more formal ways. How do we sustain respect and create peace with “the other” without doing harm to the sincerity of a human’s striving to live a religious life? In the above instance and in many others, a respectful silence and mutual dialogue can help.

In the opening story at the moment we entered into silence, I could feel persons both soften and stiffen as the differing perspectives on a mutual sacred story hung in the air. The difference was so wide a gap that we chose to encounter the mystery of difference just by being quiet, suspending any further debate or pointed discussion for a time. A deep stillness and sense of peace filled the room as each person had space to ponder, not needing exact agreement or debate. After this time of quiet worship, we took up the next verse. After the class session, over lunch, many animated conversations arose from the quiet opportunity we had experienced.

When agreement seems impossible at worst or difficult at best, what assumptions and approaches can reconcile difference? All the stories in this collection presume a reconciling and unconditionally loving God at the heart of our encounter with “the other.” Based on this assumption, each author offers a contribution toward increasing patience, passion, and understanding in doing dialogue among persons of differing faith traditions. These authors come from long practice in facilitating such encounters and have come to use the word “dialogue” as does Leonard Swidler, religion professor at Temple University, in Philadelphia, whose pioneer work in the twentieth century has done much to promote interfaith activity. He defines dialogue as “a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow.”

Swidler and the other authors in this collection are aware of the groundswell of interest and concern since 9/11 for what can ensue from the absence of dialogue. In assembling these essays, we hope to empower imams, rabbis, pastors, and their congregants to take up the work of interreligious dialogue as a peacemaking activity. We encourage the same intentional work among all religious traditions. For the sake of focus and accessibility, the authors in this collection build on the scholars’ dialogues among the Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. We want to add many others than scholars to the team, including theologians, religious leaders, teenagers and young adults, educators, and congregants for the fruition of the labor. To that end, a less formal understanding of dialogue is encouraged in several chapters. “Conversation” replaces “dialogue” in order to emphasize how interreligious engagement can be more commonplace when some basic understandings are in place.

In Chapter One, “Understanding Dialogue,” Leonard Swidler discusses the basic reasons for creating interfaith encounters, delineates ten guidelines for conducting them, and tells some of the story of what can happen for people who take up the dialogue. Then Miriam Therese Winter, in Chapter Two, “Doing Effective Dialogue—and Loving It,” describes “circles of conversation” that help make the encounter safe and productive. She and the next author, Eboo Patel, agree that one of the best ways to conduct encounters is to tell stories as the major part of any conversation—most especially in the interfaith youth work Patel does. In Chapter Three, “Storytelling as a Key Methodology for Interfaith Youth Work,” Patel and two of his co-workers, April Kunze and Noah Silverman, outline

why and how storytelling works so well. Drawing on assumptions about spiritual formation, they help us to understand just how powerful a simple yet sincere conversation can be.

Then, in Chapter Four, “The Next Thing to Dialogue,” Edith Howe and *Introduction* 3 S. Mark Heim discuss a good step to take to help start constructive conversations where a different use of stories happens; they outline in instructive detail how to organize a book study group, choose effective books, and open the conversations that can evolve from reading. How do we begin to learn to do this conversation with skill and with safety? Michael S. Kogan offers us a compelling model in Chapter Five, “Bringing the Dialogue Home,” for how the home church or synagogue is a good starting place for doing grassroots interfaith work. By being rooted in our own tradition and knowing it well, we are better able to comprehend the depth of wisdom in a different tradition. Accordingly, then, we move toward a healthy pluralism where engaged contact can expand each person’s faith and understanding without creating a sense of threat or loss of one’s own particular faith. Khaleel Mohammed, in Chapter Six, “The Art of Heeding,” then offers a frank, feisty, and refreshing appraisal of our attempts at this difficult enterprise. He calls us to humility within a renewed vigor of heeding what “the other,” the person who represents the unknown and the unfamiliar to us, actually has to say with his or her words and life. Then, in Chapter Seven, “The Power of Hope,” Racelle Weiman appeals to our inability to comprehend a God who allows for great suffering. In the face of the assault to our sensibilities of the history of the *Shoah*, she claims the power of interfaith work to inspire our hope as a religious people. She calls on each of the Abrahamic traditions represented in this collection to establish just and peaceful communities.

We want to create practices and programs for real differences to coexist without the beast of fear devouring life, light, and laughter. We hope readers will continue the conversation these writers have started. All of us have had interfaith encounters, both organized and spontaneous. How do we conduct ourselves? Do we recognize our resistances and know how to engage or disengage with appropriate respect? Do we know how to respect the differences even when we don’t want to change and to grow? If we want to grow and to change, can we do so safely without mockery or exploitation? Are understanding and tolerance enough? What else is needed? If our own beliefs are shaky, how can the encounter with difference strengthen our own faith without tearing down the other? After all these and other questions are pondered, how do we take responsibility for the most important one: Do we walk with Micah, the prophet, in doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God?

We invite readers to engage this collection with eyes open to the possibilities for interfaith encounters in the churches, synagogues, and mosques in the neighborhoods where you live. We join you in sharing some of the questions and obstacles that we know arise when trying to do interfaith activities of any kind. We encourage trust in the assumption common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Each of us is an equal before God, held in that reconciling and unconditional love and truthfulness we are intended to practice.

To encourage our practice, Joseph Stoutzenberger writes questions for reflection and suggestions for action at the end of each of the eight chapters. These questions and suggestions can be reframed and inspire different ones depending on each particular occasion for dialogue. Whatever our situation, Maria Hornung’s conclusion guides us through three important exercises. First, she describes the many roles within a faith community participants can assume in order to facilitate interreligious engagement. Second, she places Swidler’s “Dialogue Decalogue” in context. Finally, she draws on Swidler’s stages of change in engaging interreligious dialogue in order to invite each of us to reflection our own experiences.

This collection adds an epilogue. Why? Good conversation or fruitful dialogue grows out of real-life stories at the grass roots of our communities. After all the questions, suggestions, and discussions about interfaith dialogue, we wanted to share stories of grassroots dialogue as it happens. Achmad Munjid tells the story of his Indonesian people in their struggle to build a home for everyone. In his story, he refers often to the heart of interfaith dialogue happening when friendship is born.

In the final story of the epilogue, Marcia Prager and I tell the story of our interfaith friendship, of how, out of each of our search within our own religious tradition for its depth, we found ourselves facilitating a Christian Quaker/Jewish interfaith dialogue. These closing stories of lived experience invite the telling of your own.

Each of us is needed in the work of religious reconciliation. We need many more persons who are skilled in interpreting our sacred texts; we need those who can lead worship with respect for differing practices; we need people who choose to build friendships with the joy of knowing “the other.” When the needs are met, we befriend

one another as followers of the one God. And perhaps, just maybe, we can catch a glimpse of the peace that is our inheritance as those followers.

—*Rebecca Kratz Mays*

## Sample Questions for Reflection and Suggestions for Action (from Chapter 2)

### Questions for Reflection

1. How important is it for members of one religion to feel comfortable in the setting of another religion? How can interreligious engagement serve this end?
2. The author suggests shifting emphasis from dialogue to building relationships. How could we fashion dialogue events that would foster creating friendships? Should this be an implicit or explicit goal of dialogue?
3. What factors affect how we do interreligious dialogue today? (For instance, how do we do interreligious dialogue when “the other” lives next door or is married to our cousin? How do we do dialogue when so many people are only marginally involved in their own tradition?)
4. The author is comfortable with entering into an unfamiliar world, confident that the spirit will provide guidance. Have you found this to be true when people from diverse backgrounds come together dedicated to mutual listening and learning? Do you agree with her advice: “Just do it”?
5. Is the three-step series of questions the author used in her “conversation circles” applicable to interreligious dialogue sessions in general? Why or why not?
6. Is it better to delay hard questions until some sense of community has been established within a group?
7. An effective teaching model integrates what is taught with how it is taught. How can this principle be applied to interreligious dialogue?
8. What possible collaborative actions might accompany interreligious dialogue?

### Suggestions for Action

- A. Reflect on your story, your experience of faith, your religion, and your cultural background. What would you want others to know about you in an interreligious context?
- B. Begin formulating questions that you have regarding members of other religions and their experience.
- C. Design a “conversation circle” as described by the author.

## Q & A with Editor Rebecca Kratz Mays

### 1. What does "dialogue" mean?

Most simply put, dialogue is a conversation between two interested persons. In the context of doing intrafaith or interfaith dialogue, the intention is more explicit. Dialogue is a two-way communication between persons who hold significantly differing views on a subject, with the purpose of learning more truth about the subject from the other. It is not the process of imparting truth, however gently and kindly, to the ignorant. Genuine dialogue assumes that no one person or group has a monopoly on the truth on any given subject.

### 2. What does "interfaith" or "interreligious" dialogue mean?

Since World War II, a sense of our world, our planet as a global community has mushroomed. With the click of a computer mouse, any one of us can now connect to any other part of the world or subject matter beyond our ken. Our very economic securities are now enmeshed in a web of "globalization" where we can no longer deny our interdependence on one another. Interfaith or interreligious are terms to help us recognize the pluralism of religion. If no one religion can claim all of the truth, then each religious path now has a responsibility to share its truth with respect for the interdependence of truth among them all.

### 3. How do economics and religion impact interfaith dialogue?

In the 20th century, socialist and capitalist systems vied for primacy in nation-states around the globe and both systems eschewed religion as irrelevant. The 21st century is seeing a resurgence of religious life everywhere and the power of choosing to live religiously impacts how one buys and sells and runs a business. Some even see this rise in religious life as a necessary corrective influence on the excess of greed that can occur in either a capitalist or socialist economic system. When "mega churches" in the US and "heavy metal" bands in Pakistan all have access to global technologies, we must learn how to dialogue well, to listen and to learn from one another.

### 4. How will this book help?

The chapters in this book are written from the experiences of persons who are steeped in doing dialogue where it is most needed. Each author describes his or her experience and offers very practical, easy suggestions for taking a first step to create dialogue in one's own neighborhood. Whether it is a book discussion group, a storytelling session, "twinning" - matching a local church with a local mosque or a mosque with a synagogue, the suggestions assume urgency and a simplicity of getting started.

### 5. Who can use this book?

Anyone interested in doing interfaith dialogue. It is written for a lay audience and it is aimed at theologians and religious leaders, religious educators, and local-level animators for interreligious engagement and congregants at the local level. For example, the Dialogue Institute at Temple University organized a "trialogue" among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Amman, Jordan, in the spring of 2008. After the event, the Amman Prince ordered several copies for use among imams to help spread the word of what had happened at the trialogue.

### 6. What is the most important reason for doing interfaith dialogue?

To build peace among people. The sad irony of history is that most wars and the tragic killing of

innocent lives have started or continued because of the misuse of religious creeds. Ultimately, the religious life is to establish just and peaceful societies for all persons. Interfaith dialogue is one of the surest paths to reach that goal. It requires patience and perseverance; it is not a "quick fix."

One of the book's contributors, Eboo Patel, said it well at the recent American Academy of Religion meeting in Chicago. In the 1950s, very few persons talked about or knew a "civil rights activist" in the US; by the 1970s, we all knew one or were one. He claims that now is the era to make known "interfaith activists." This book hopes to contribute to helping create such a movement.