SACRED GROUND: PLURALISM, PREJUDICE, AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICA

By Eboo Patel
(Beacon Press, 2012)

A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE
Created by Interfaith Youth Core
PURPOSE OF THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE
Interfaith cooperation happens when people come together to respect one another’s identities, build relationships, and take action for the common good. Use this discussion guide to spark conversations about the stories, theories, and concepts in Eboo Patel’s Sacred Ground and to explore how you can take interfaith action on your campus or in your community.

LEARNING GOALS
Use this discussion guide with a group to:

• Identify and articulate personal motivations for engaging in interfaith cooperation
• Develop interfaith literacy by sharing stories about the various religious and ethical identities represented in your group
• Identify action steps for building interfaith cooperation

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE
This guide can be used in one of two ways, based on the goals and structure of your group:

1. Use the entire discussion guide for 5 separate meetings to discuss the 5 sections in detail. (Recommended for course curriculum, interfaith clubs, faculty reading groups, or campus administration)

• Meeting 1 – Purpose of Discussion Guide and Introduction
• Meeting 2 – Part I – Ground Zero, The Muslim Menace, The Evangelical Shift
• Meeting 3 – Part II – The Science of Interfaith Cooperation, The Art of Interfaith Leadership
• Meeting 4 – Part III – Colleges, Seminaries, American Muslim Child
• Meeting 5 – Conclusion

2. Use the questions in blue for a group that has read the entire book and is only meeting once to discuss the highlights. (Recommended for book clubs, community interfaith initiatives, or all-campus read seminar)

Each section of the discussion guide is divided into four sections:

1. Quotes – What do you observe about the selected quotes? – As a group, discuss your observations about the quotes at the top of each section.
2. Themes – What themes emerge from Patel’s ideas and stories? – Based on your observations from the stories and ideas in each section, discuss what themes stand out.
3. Reflections – What are your experiences that relate to the quotes, observations, and interpretations? – Discuss the reflections as an opportunity to spark interfaith dialogue among your group. This is a time to make connections between the ideas of Sacred Ground and how they apply to your college, department, or interfaith student organization.
4. Applications – What are the action steps you can take as an individual? As a group, and as individuals, reflect on how you can take action for interfaith cooperation.
SETTING THE SPACE
Before you get started, it’s important to set the right tone for your discussion, so that everyone will feel comfortable sharing their insights on the book as well as more personal reflections. Your discussion of *Sacred Ground* may bring up some sensitive reactions regarding religion, social justice, politics, and personal worldviews; having shared guidelines will help to ensure you can have those conversations productively.

**Safe Space Guidelines:**
Together, brainstorm guidelines you will need from yourself and others in order to feel comfortable in your discussions. Feel free to write your group guidelines below

Examples of possible guidelines are:
- Listening attentively when someone else is speaking
- Using “I” statements
- Anyone can pass on answering a particular question
- When listening, assess both the intent and the effect of those words before assuming an offensive motive

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Read the responses aloud and ask if everyone feels comfortable abiding by the guidelines. Revisit or reword guidelines as needed.

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**QUOTE**
“The idea is that serving others is a common value to all traditions—including secular ones—and when religiously diverse young people engage in volunteer projects together, they become both committed to the cause of interfaith cooperation and ambassadors for its importance. I was coming to the realization that these activities were necessary but not sufficient. We needed new strategies, new approaches that could give rise to a new narrative, a tale that spanned the ages and included people of all religions and cultures, a story about the magnificence of putting the high ideals of pluralism into concrete practice” (pp. xi-xii).

--- Discuss this quote ---

**THEMES**
- What parallels do you see between Cordoba and the United States?
- What stands out to you about the themes of Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America?

**REFLECTIONS**
- Tell the story of what led you to read this book.
- Why do you think Patel says interfaith service isn’t enough to advance religious pluralism?

**APPLICATION – INTERFAITH LITERACY**
- Building interfaith literacy can start with reflection on your own values and practices: Discuss how your religious or ethical tradition calls you to practice service.
- After listening to the group answer the previous question, what common themes emerged? Were there any clear differences?
Part I – Ground Zero, The Muslim Menace, The Evangelical Shift

QUOTE
“Listening to Fatima speak of the work she did as an American Muslim on behalf of the LGBT community, I thought of a famous saying of the Prophet Muhammad: “No one of you truly believes until he wants for his brother what he wants for himself.” It is an ethic central to Islam. It is an ethic, in a hundred languages and in every conceivable form of prayer, that has built America” (p. 22).

-- Discuss this quote --

THEMES
• Describe some of the interfaith relationships that broke down barriers in Part I.
• Patel articulates one of the central arguments against religious diversity in America, saying, “Replace “Catholic” with “Muslim” and “church hierarchy” with “sharia law” and, fifty years later, the pattern is repeating itself. Like the anti-Catholic movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the central argument of the forces of Islamophobia is that the very nature of Islam is in conflict with American values, especially freedom of religion and the separation of church and state” (p. 46). What parallels do you see between the stories of prejudice against American Muslims, and those against Catholics?

REFLECTIONS
• In a nation founded on freedom and equality, why are there so many conflicts when it comes to religious differences?
• Have you discussed your personal religious or philosophical beliefs with friends or family who think differently than you do? How do your interfaith relationships and discussions about religion align with Putnam’s research cited on p. 54 about cultivating positive knowledge and relationships?

APPLICATION – INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP
• Where in your life and community can you take active initiative for positive interfaith relationships?
• Pastor Bob Roberts overcame his prejudice of Catholics by starting a conversation with a Catholic priest and discovering their shared value of helping the Vietnamese people. Roberts reflected, “Maybe there’s no such thing as enemies, just people we don’t know and haven’t met” (p. 60). How can you take the simple step of starting a conversation with someone who believes differently but shares one of your passions?
Part II – The Science of Interfaith Cooperation, The Art of Interfaith Leadership

QUOTE
“The more I studied this area, the more I started to see attitudes, knowledge, and relationships as three sides of a triangle. If you know some (accurate and positive) things about a religion, and you know some people from that religion, you are far more likely to have positive attitudes toward that tradition and that community. The more favorable your attitude, the more open you will be to new relationships and additional appreciative knowledge. A couple of cycles around this triangle, and people from different faiths are starting to smile at each other on the streets instead of looking away or crossing to the other side” (p.79).

-- Discuss this quote --

THEMES
• List people or stories in Part II that demonstrate the elements of the “interfaith triangle”:
  1. Appreciative knowledge
  2. Positive behaviors/relationships
  3. Positive attitudes
• On pp 95-96, Patel describes the four parts of interfaith literacy (that lay the foundation for interfaith leadership. How do these four parts support the three sides of the interfaith triangle?

REFLECTIONS
• The interfaith triangle can also cycle the opposite way: “People without much knowledge about other religions and with little contact with people from those communities are far more likely to harbor negative attitudes toward those traditions and communities” (p. 78). Have you seen examples of or experienced this cycle?
• The Dalai Lama and Chris Stedman both give inspiring examples of people from other religious traditions that have influenced their perspective. Which aspects of interfaith literacy do you see in these two stories, and how are they important to interfaith leadership? Patel describes the four parts of interfaith literacy on pp. 95-96 as an:
  • Appreciative knowledge of other traditions
  • Ability to identify shared values
  • Understanding of the history of interfaith cooperation
  • Articulation of one’s own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation

APPLICATION – THE SCIENCE OF INTERFAITH COOPERATION
• Patel has a breakthrough when he realizes, “Movements aren’t built by a single person running himself [or herself] ragged through a thousand places; they’re built when a diverse network of people internalize a central message and are able to communicate it effectively to their various communities (p. 103). How can you cultivate interfaith leadership in yourself? How might you keep this task from feeling overwhelming?
Part III – Colleges, Seminaries, American Muslim Child

QUOTE
“We were too busy reading critical race theory to pay attention to any of this. The problem of the color line blinded us to the coming challenge of the faith line. We even ignored the religious dimensions of obvious issues. We talked a lot about Cornel West the Black Panther, and not at all about Cornel West the black Baptist. We viewed the university’s mascot, Chief Illiniwek, as a racist symbol but knew almost nothing about the spiritual role that chiefs played in Native American religious culture. And for all our talk about the importance of identity, of the personal being political, of knowing one another’s stories, we knew almost nothing about each other’s religious lives.” (p. 114)

-- Discuss this quote --

THEMES
• Why does Patel think youth have such an important role to play in building interfaith cooperation?
• What are the qualities of colleges and universities that Patel highlights as prime opportunities for building interfaith cooperation?

REFLECTIONS
• IFYC concentrates its efforts on college campuses because, “All the positive social capital in our broader society—faith-based groups, volunteer programs, educational opportunities, forums for discussion and exchange—exist on campuses in concentrated form” (p. 123). Discuss what you see as the opportunities and challenges of interfaith work with young adults on college and university campuses.

APPLICATION – INTERFAITH LITERACY AS AN ONGOING PROCESS
• Throughout the entire book, Patel discusses current events, historical movements, and social reformations related to religious pluralism in America. As a group, scroll through a news website or flip through a newspaper and identify current events that touch on topics of religious diversity and identities. This might include conflict among groups, the identity of public figures, legislation being debated, or communities serving during a tragedy. Discuss your findings.
• Patel describes his son Zayd receiving a book about the Prophet Muhammad from a Hindu friend on his birthday, reflecting, “...nothing seemed to interest Zayd in his own faith as much as the idea that his friend from a different tradition respected it” (p. 162). Together, make a list of how you can demonstrate respect for the different traditions represented in your discussion group or community.
Conclusion

QUOTE
“I made friends with all these people from different faiths at Interfaith Youth Core. I couldn’t stand thinking that members of my church were insulting good people they’d never met because of these lies in a chain e-mail. I mean, every week at Interfaith Youth Core, I went and did a service project with Muslims, Jews, and humanists. It was a great experience. I just didn’t know how to take it back to my community or how it related to me being a Christian. Well, these last few days, I’ve been reading the Bible a lot, and here’s what I realized: Sending that e-mail and standing up for Muslims was the most Christian thing I have ever done” (pp. 168-169).

-- Discuss this quote --

PLURALISM, PREJUDICE, THE PROMISE OF AMERICA
• You have discussed many stories and perspectives about identity, community, and action. This group has wrestled with the complexities of religious pluralism on a micro-scale. By coming together like this, you have been involved in building interfaith cooperation. Building interfaith cooperation requires young interfaith leaders to build relationships across identities, tell powerful stories to bridge divides, and act together on issues of common concern. The identities we hold, the stories we tell, and the actions we take all help contribute to the interfaith movement.

FINAL REFLECTIONS
• How do you see yourself contributing to the “promise of America”?
• What have you gained from the different perspectives represented in your discussion group? Take a moment to share specific examples with one another of how you have each been impacted by hearing one another’s perspectives.

ACTION STEPS
• A community interfaith service project is a powerful way to build pluralism and introduce a different kind of conversation about interfaith identities into society. Are there ways this discussion group can serve the community together as a follow-up to these conversations?

If you want to take the next step to contributing to the movement, visit IFYC's website www.ifyc.org to download resources to help you start organizing on your campus and in your community, or find us on Facebook or Twitter.