

Interfaith Leadership and Typologies of Religious Plurality

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One of the main challenges for religions today is to explain theologically the diversity of religions and the complexities that arise when members of different religious traditions and faiths encounter one another. It is a challenge for any representative of any religion to maintain his/her identity and, at the same time, to be open to dialogue with other religious traditions. The task of religious leaders has become an interfaith task in of itself as the diversity of religions poses a serious question to the truthfulness and authenticity of every single religion. As a response to this religious diversity, four views are important: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and, the recently proposed notion of particularism. This essay tackles this typology together with the concept of interfaith leadership and various forms it can take within each of these frameworks. It also provides some examples of programs that train religious leaders to become interfaith leaders.

Keywords: Typologies of religious plurality, interfaith leadership, exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, particularism

The post-modern society of today presents new challenges for any given religion. One of these challenges is the diversity of religions and the complexities that arise when members of different religious traditions encounter one another. It is a challenge for any representative of any religion to maintain his/her identity and, at the same time, to be open to dialogue with other religious traditions. The twentieth century saw the beginnings of the ecumenical movement and attempts on the part of great religions of the world to lead an interreligious dialogue (and to develop a theology of religions). The task of religious leaders has become an interfaith task in of itself as the diversity of religions poses a serious question to the truthfulness and authenticity of every single religion. The fact that most religions, in their orthodox versions, present themselves as providing privileged access to the truth that they proclaim, makes the issue of the diversity of religions even more difficult and complex. As a response to this religious diversity, four views (typologies) are important: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and, the recently proposed notion of particularism.¹ This essay will tackle these typologies together with the concept of interfaith leadership. Before we do this, let's take a look at a concrete example of what we would qualify as "interfaith leadership."

On May 7, 2013, the City Council Hall in Lviv (Western Ukraine) hosted an unprecedented event—the inauguration of an interfaith dialogue center ([Libertas Center](#)), an

¹ See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983). For a summary of typologies please also see Adam Y. Wells, "A Tree With Many Branches: Abrahamic Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue" in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 27:1 (January 2017), 25–44. As well, see Marianne Moyaert, "Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness" in *Modern Theology* 28:1 (January 2012), 25–52. Although the typology approach has been somewhat criticized, it still remains one of the legitimate ways to look at the religious diversity and the religious Other. For the discussion on this, please see Paul Hedges, "The Theology of Religions Typology Redefined: Openness and Tendencies" in Elizabeth Harris, ed., *The Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2016), 76–92).

organization that will promote interconfessional and interreligious dialogue on an academic and practical level in Ukraine. Apart from the Christian religious leaders (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) who came to the event, there were Jewish and Muslim authorities who took the floor and spoke of the importance of building bridges, promoting dialogue and understanding. One of the keynote speakers for the event was a Jewish rabbi, [Jack Bemporad](#), who traveled from the US to attend the opening of this center. This was the very first time that non-Christian leaders spoke publicly at the Lviv City Council. Before World War II, one-third of the city’s population was Jewish. Jews suffered a great deal in Ukraine. None of this was mentioned by the rabbi. Instead, he spoke of the prophetic vision of a renewed humanity, of hope, of peace, and of love. He even quoted the words of Jesus of Nazareth from the gospel, reminding everyone that love comes first in any human interaction and relations. This is what we would define as interfaith leadership: *being able to speak to a religiously mixed audience, capture their attention, inspire them with a motivation that would possibly lead to (positive) action.*

The very rabbi who spoke at this particular event was not new to interreligious dialogue. Having worked for over fifty years in the field of promoting relations among various religious groups, the rabbi knew of the importance of understanding the religious other, listening to the other, standing with the other. He also understood that without knowing the other’s history, theology—at least in general terms—it is not possible to start a meaningful dialogue with him or her. This particular story clearly exemplifies what interfaith leadership is. In this essay, we will focus on the concept of interfaith leadership and tackle the “whys” of its importance and actuality in the twenty-first century. This will be looked at through the four typologies of interfaith dialogue: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism.

What does it take to be an interfaith leader? What constitutes his/her identity and what are the qualities of an interfaith leader?² Are religious leaders *per se* interfaith leaders? Are there any programs that specifically have as objective to train interfaith leaders? According to Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, “Academically speaking, ‘interfaith Leadership’ is part of the larger field of ‘interfaith studies.’ Just as you might study education at a university to become a teacher, in the future you will be able to take coursework in interfaith studies in preparation for a career in interfaith leadership.”³

Contrary to some of the sociological predictions as to the declining role of religion,⁴ religious communities and religious leaders in the twenty-first century, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that religion and faith communities continue to play an important role in many societies today. Interreligious or interfaith dialogue has gained special attention and prominence in theological as well as in secular circles. As some authors note, “The combination of increased religious diversity on campuses, the embrace of multiculturalism by higher education more

² See Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi 2011), 2.

³ Eboo Patel, “Studying Interfaith Leadership” in *Sojourners* (May 2014), <https://sojo.net/magazine/may-2014/studying-interfaith-leadership>.

⁴ On this subject matter please see: Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor, 1967); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1912); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Los Angeles: Roxbury, 1905).

broadly, and the visibility of religious controversy in global politics has made the proactive and positive engagement of interfaith issues a necessity.”⁵

Within theological and academic circles, there have been various models and typologies presented, explaining the dynamics of religious plurality and diversity and the role that religious leaders take on within such models. Without any doubt, an interfaith leader is someone who is able to understand such models and to make his/her way through the challenges and difficulties that are present in each one of these models. Let us give a brief look at these models to see which one is best suited for an interfaith leader to develop his/her potential as a leader.

Typologies of Religious Plurality

In the context of religious plurality, there are four main typologies or frameworks that serve as attempts to understand interfaith dynamics and, depending on which typology one uses, interfaith leadership would take a different role and tasks within each of these different models. These are: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism. Within each of these typologies, an understanding of leadership and interfaith is also different and it has consequences on how interfaith dialogue is seen and practiced. In the words of Marianne Moyaert, “The ‘theory’ of the theology of religions has consequences for the ‘practice’ of interreligious dialogue and for the tense dialogical relationship.”⁶

At the basis of religious exclusivism lies a view that my religion (and my religious identity) is the only true and authentic religion (and religious identity). Such position excludes others. The exclusivist language contains many binary statements such as “we are saved and they are not,” “we are good, they are bad,” “we have got the truth, and they have not.”⁷ The main goal of exclusivism is to convert those who are outside of my religion and to show them the only true path to God. One of the features of exclusivism is a literal interpretation of sacred texts. Among fundamentalists exclusivism is very widespread, but not all exclusivists are fundamentals.

One of the Catholic authors who wrote on this topic, J. A. DiNoia, admits that in the past (in the Catholic circles) exclusivism was identified with the formula *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.⁸ However, as he explains it, the formula itself was not meant to be directed toward non-Christians, but rather a warning for those who would leave Christianity and embrace another religion or simply reject the Christian message. Starting with the definition of religious exclusivism as “the view that the doctrines of one religion are completely true; the doctrines of all others are false whenever there is conflict,” it is often noted that Christianity until recent times “has been resolutely exclusivist.”⁹

⁵ Eboo Patel, Katie Bringman Baxter, and Noah Silverman, “Leadership Practices for Interfaith Excellence in Higher Education” in *Liberal Education*, 101:1–2 (Winter/Spring 2015), 48.

⁶ Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 47.

⁷ See J. Derrick Lemons, “The ‘Us-Them’ Dilemma: The Need for Reflexivity while Teaching Interreligious Encounters,” in Marc A. Pugliese and Alex Y. Hwang, *Teaching Interreligious Encounters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 39–50. See also, Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments in the Theology of Inter-religious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness,” in *Modern Theology* 28:1 (January 2012), 25–52.

⁸ See J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

⁹ Edward Craig, ed. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 8. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 260.

One thing that exclusivists are right about is their claim that various religions are not about the same goals. Therefore, salvation cannot be found outside of its context. What Christians call salvation is totally different from what Buddhists envision as the ultimate goal of life. For Christians, salvation is the union with the Triune God, the Trinity. It is the beatific vision of God (though even here Eastern and Western theologies have a different understanding of what that vision of God means). Buddhists are not looking for salvation as a union with the divinity. For them, enlightenment and annihilation of self are the key soteriological principles, if we can even have a Buddhist soteriology at all!

According to Adam Wales, this typology has a few nuanced issues. One of the problems with this typology is that in any religion there are usually a few confessions/denominations that create intra-religious diversity, which in turn raises a question: Which one best represents a given religion? The presence of different confessions in any given religion contradicts the claim to exclusivism by any of those confessions.¹⁰

Moreover, exclusivism reduces any given religion to a list of dogmas and teachings which is not always applicable to all religions. Also, because of its colonizing tendencies, exclusivism does not appear to be an ethical model for dialogue. As it aggressively imposes its way of thinking, its understanding of truth and its triumphalist claims do not make it look ethically good either. Even the way exclusivists relate to others and name others speaks of an inadmissible approach. (Exclusivists would usually name representatives of other religions as non-Muslims, non-Christians, non-Jewish, and so on.) This also speaks of the fact that the “other” exists only as if there were no place of other in the understanding of exclusivists. The other is always a “no” to what the exclusivist is.

The next typology, inclusivism (similarly to exclusivism), envisions the existence of one true religion. Differently from exclusivism, however, is that this model does not exclude. That is, it includes the possibility that truth might be found/present in other religions as well.¹¹ It was in the second half of the twentieth century that inclusivism has gained a favorable interest in theological-philosophical circles within Christianity. Inclusivism proposes a view that “one religion contains the final truth and others contain only approaches to or approximations of it; the privileged religion offers the most effective path to salvation; but those outside it can somehow be saved or liberated.”¹² According to some authors, inclusivism is not coherent because it presumes that every religion aims at the same goal: “inclusivists are those who espouse some version of the view that all religious communities implicitly aim at the salvation that the Christian community most adequately commends.”¹³ It is a mistake to say that all religions aim at the same goal. “The true

¹⁰ Adam Wells, “A Tree With Many Branches,” 26.

¹¹ Karl Rahner’s expression “anonymous Christians” to designate followers of other religions would not be acceptable today by those who would like to promote dialogue. According to Rahner, “Anonymous Christianity means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity—Let us say, a Buddhist monk—who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not, I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that,” in Paul Imhoff and Hubert Baillouonsm, eds., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 135.

¹² Edward Craig, ed. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 260.

¹³ J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions*, 37.

aim of life,” as the author refers to what every religion commends its followers, means different things for different religions. Not all religions have the concept of salvation, and even if they do, it is not the same thing. Moreover, what complicates the issue is that even if we assume that religions have the same aim to achieve, the means to achieve that goal (salvation) differ from one religious community to the other.

The factor of the diversity of religions occupies a less important place in the theory of inclusivism than it does in pluralism (which we will treat next). The major issue for inclusivists is to explain and offer the possibility of salvation for the members of other religions. According to DiNoia, one of the drawbacks of inclusivism is that this position tends to “sublate the distinctive soteriological programs of other religions in the Christian scheme of salvation.”¹⁴ From all of this follows that inclusivism is a dishonest way to account for the diversity of religions. We cannot ignore the existing differences between the different religions. In addition, inclusivist interpretation of the diversity of religions fails to link the aim of life of a particular religion and the patterns of life that are commended by the religion in question: “such [inclusivist] accounts assert that the adherents of other traditions attain through them not the aim defined and fostered by their distinctive patterns of life but that fostered by [the patterns of life taught by another tradition].”¹⁵

The approach of the Catholic Church since the advent of the Second Vatican Council and particularly since the proclamation of the revolutionary document *Nostra Aetate* is a good example of an inclusive model for interfaith dialogue. The Catholic Church’s teaching is that the fullness of truth and salvation is present in the Catholic Church but there are elements of truth in other religions and religious traditions as well. Such attitude towards those who are not Catholic is very inclusive and open.

One of the critiques of inclusivism is that, although it does include others and it is open to dialogue with the others, the others, in the inclusivist model, are rather “mirrors” in so far as they mirror my own identity or parts of my own identity. In other words, the “otherness” is not taken seriously and thus the other loses his/her uniqueness as other. In this typology, interfaith dialogue means only looking for similarities, while closing the eyes to the differences and this makes true and deep theological dialogue impossible. According to Marianne Moyart, “Inclusivism includes the other but likewise robs the self of a sense of her own strangeness and thus of her unique singularity.”¹⁶

Pluralism is the third and most “democratic” approach to interfaith dialogue. “According to pluralism, a single ultimate religious reality is being differently experienced and understood in all the major religious traditions; they all, as far as we can tell, offer equally effective paths to salvation or liberation.”¹⁷ It might seem that pluralism sees a wider picture than inclusivism and exclusivism. This system proposes a belief in many aims, but in reality it practices a belief in one goal. Pluralism honestly acknowledges the diversity of religions. However, it is lacking in logic, because it teaches that doctrines of different religions are only “partial expressions of a commonly

¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹⁵ Ibid., 77.

¹⁶ Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments,” 31.

¹⁷ Edward Craig, ed. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 260.

sought goal.”¹⁸ In this way, pluralism ignores the differences, which at times are differences in what is essential to religions.

At the heart of pluralism lies a conviction that different religions are different, yet equal, roads or ways to the transcendent reality, God. The presence of diverse cultures, languages, geographical loci and historical epochs all have to do with religious plurality. According to Marianne Moyaert, the pluralistic model is based on four main pillars: first, there is the phenomenology of similitude; second, truth, in view of pluralism, must be “de-absolutized”; third, symmetrical understanding of the other; and, fourth, dynamic openness to the other.¹⁹

In the framework of pluralistic typology, one attempts to find similarities and commonalities that religions share, thus creating grounds for dialogue that leads to the same end – the same God who reveals himself through different religions. In this understanding, religions help each other understand God better.

In the words of John Hick, “We have to ask whether people in church, synagogue, mosque, gurdwara, and tern-pie are worshipping different Gods or are worshipping the same God? Are Adonai and God, Allah and Ekoamkar, Rama and Krishna different gods, or are these different names for the same ultimate Being?”²⁰ Another author, I. Omelchuk, writing on the theme of pluralism notes that “The significance of pluralism is that it not only actualizes the existing diversity and plurality [of religions], but that it aims to organize and establish a meaningful dialogue of the concurrently existing theories, methods, worldviews and research programs. . . . Pluralism’s worth is in its ability to harmonize the potentials of dialoguing sides.”²¹

On the other hand, the critics of the pluralism model claim that pluralism tries to make diversity homogenous. Such attempts to reduce diversity only make things worse for dialogue, as authentic dialogue must help reconcile and accept differences; dialogue does not target artificial unity. Moreover, not all of the religions are soteriological, nor not all of religions place the same value to the same concepts. Similarly to inclusivism, pluralism does not pay enough attention to differences within one religion and this is not a good sign for establishing and leading authentic dialogue. And although pluralism is famous for its use of metaphors and analogies, these techniques are not always best suited to convey the essence of religions and might sometimes be even detrimental and oppressive.²²

One common critique that can be applied to exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is that all three of these typologies relate to religions that are concerned with salvation so in this way all three models are exclusive (and understandable mostly within Christianity or soteriological religions).

¹⁸ J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions*, 40.

¹⁹ See Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments,” 32.

²⁰ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 66.

²¹ I. Omelchuk, “Pluralism and Tolerance: The Potential of Fruitful Interaction,” in *Worldview-Value Self-Determination of Humanity: The Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference of Young Scientists: “Tolerance: Socio-Semantic Variations and the European Integration Context* (Chernivtsi, Ukraine: May 6–9, 2015).

²² See Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments” 35.

Let us turn our attention to particularism, which, together with exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is one of the typologies in the field of interreligious dialogue (IRD). Particularism has gained prominence in the last few decades as a response to the three latter approaches in IRD. In a nutshell, the particularist view on the diversity of religions and faiths claims that every single religion is particular in a way such that there are profound (and irreconcilable) theological, philosophical differences between religions that cannot be brought together and mixed as if to form some common platform. As Marianne Moyaert puts it,

Particularism is especially wary of generalizing theories on a common ground, on mutual experience or purpose or on focusing on faith traditions as they are *practiced*. Reducing a living faith to a system of abstract schemas ignores the way in which faith is always experienced concretely. One should never abstract the particular elements of a religious tradition from the way that the adherents of that tradition practice them.²³

According to the particularist stance, each and every religion is a distinct system with its own beliefs, dogmas, teachings, rituals and practices that cannot be reduced to some universal abstract understanding of what religion is. One of the dominant approaches in particularism is comparative theology which aims at understanding a “lived” religious experience within one religion and how similar/different that experience is from another religion. In the words of Francis Clooney (one of the “spokespersons” of comparative theology),

Comparative theology—comparative and theological beginning to end—marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.²⁴

It is within particularism that we believe interfaith leadership has the most potential to develop, flourish and make a difference.

Interfaith programs that train interfaith leaders

In recent times, many leading universities have begun to offer courses in interfaith studies. While the discipline itself has lots of theory, interfaith leadership has clear and concrete goals: building bridges of connection among various faiths, improving relations and working for the common good. No doubt that an interfaith leader has to know at least the basics of other faiths (theologies), historical data and the current situation. This is a must.

It must also be said, that being recent, the discipline is still at its early stage of developing and evolving. One thing that sets this discipline apart is its multidisciplinary approach: it combines

²³ Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Development,” 35.

²⁴ Clooney, Francis, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 10. See also Ulrich Winkler, “What is Comparative Theology?” in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People*, edited by David Cheetham, Ulrich Winkler, Oddbjørn Leirvik, and Judith Gruber (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 231–64, at 240.

various approaches to interfaith issues, sometimes with a mixture of attitudes that are either exclusivistic or inclusivistic or pluralistic or particularist in nature.

Eboo Patel defines an interfaith leader “as someone with the vision, knowledge base, and skill set to nurture understanding and cooperation among people who orient around religion differently.”²⁵ While in this essay we do not have the space to treat in detail programs that train interfaith leaders, it is worthwhile mentioning some of the world-known centers and their educational programs that offer trainings for religious leaders as one of their main objectives. In this essay we will mention two programs that we have directly come in contact with and we will mention their methods of educating interfaith leaders. These programs are: the [John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue](#) and Fellowship Program of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (also known as the [KAICIID Dialogue Center](#), or simply KAICIID). While the reader can familiarize himself/herself with the activities of these two centers by visiting their websites, for the lack of space here we will just provide basic information about what they offer in terms of interfaith education.

The John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue has a special place in preparing religious leaders for interfaith work. It is a program that was born out of a partnership between [the Russell Berrie Foundation](#) (a Jewish philanthropic foundation) and the [Pontifical \(Papal\) University of St. Thomas Aquinas](#) (the Angelicum) in Rome. In its mission it is directly stated that the Center aims to build “bridges between Christian, Jewish and other religious traditions by providing the next generation of religious leaders with a comprehensive understanding of and dedication to interfaith issues and action.”²⁶ Since its establishment in 2008, the Center has had about 10 Fellows per year who undertake a number of courses in Catholic-Jewish dialogue, history of dialogue and related subjects. Part of this program also includes a study-visit to Israel, public lectures and conferences on Interreligious Understanding, as well as many extracurricular activities. Having recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, the JPPII Center has organized an international conference under a title “[Education for Action](#)” that gathered about twenty interfaith organizations to participate in a fair-like exhibition. This was the very first time for such a gathering at a Pontifical University that has opened its doors for important players in the field of interfaith dialogue.

KAICIID is an intergovernmental organization whose mandate is “to promote the use of dialogue globally to prevent and resolve conflict to enhance understanding and cooperation. Established as an intergovernmental organization in November 2012, KAICIID is a partner for UN agencies, national governments and internationally active religious and interreligious organizations.”²⁷ Since 2015 KAICIID has offered fellowships for religious leaders to enhance their interfaith skills. This is a one-year program with three residential training courses (that last one week) and with on-line engagement. This program, unlike the John Paul II Center Fellowship described above, focuses more on the methodology of interfaith dialogue, rather than theology. KAICIID has recently released a manual, “Interreligious Dialogue Resource Guide,” that is to serve as a practical tool for its fellows and alumni to teach interfaith dialogue in both formal and informal settings.

²⁵ Eboo Patel, “Preparing Interfaith Leaders: Knowledge Base and Skill Set for Interfaith Leaders” in *New Directions for Student Leadership*, no. 152 (Winter 2016), 75–86, at 77.

²⁶ See <http://www.jp2center.org/>

²⁷ See <https://www.kaiciid.org/>

Conclusion

In this essay we attempted to consider the concept of interfaith leadership within various typologies for interfaith plurality and dialogue. In our post-modern society new challenges arise for religions: diversity and plurality of religions itself is a challenge and there is a need to provide theological answers. Secular institutions, governments and non-religious NGOs also start looking at interfaith dialogue and in particular, to religious leaders, to help solve pressing issues.²⁸ Religious leaders have a double-task within their communities: to lead/serve their community and to have the skills necessary to build bridges with other religions, thus to become interfaith leaders who represent their faith tradition, but at the same time who are open to dialogue with the others.²⁹ While interfaith leadership is a new concept, it still needs to be developed theologically and its benefits from a sociological point of view must be further researched and studied.

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²⁸ See Douglas Pratt, "Secular Government and Interfaith Dialogue" in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 20:1 (June 2010), 42–57.

²⁹ In this article we have not dealt with the concept of what Eboo Patel would call "civic interfaith leadership," that is, someone, not necessarily a religious leader, who uses interfaith dialogue as a tool to make a difference in society. For Patel, such interfaith leadership requires five key skills: "building a radar screen for religious diversity, developing a public narrative of interfaith cooperation, building relationship and mobilizing religiously diverse constituencies, creating activities that bring people together who orient around religion differently, facilitating interfaith conversations with a religiously diverse group." See Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: a Primer*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 135.