

## **Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims, 2nd ed.**

*Muhammad Shafiq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer*

*Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011.  
pbk. 168 pages.*

*Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims* is certainly that – a practical guide to help local Muslim leaders navigate the tricky waters of interfaith dialogue. More than that, however, it is a document intended to persuade Muslims, who on the whole are reticent and even staunchly opposed in many cases, to engage in interfaith dialogue in the first place.

This is evident in the preface of the second edition, which begins with a 2010 incident at the Islamic Center of Rochester, New York. A scholar visiting from the Middle East was speaking on the necessity for Muslims to talk to people of other faiths. When he had finished, one person in the audience strongly objected, even warning the speaker that he was in danger of hellfire for suggesting such things. Despite the watershed initiative by Saudi Arabia King Abdullah in calling together the 2008 Madrid Interfaith Conference, “many Muslims who attend the mosque for daily worship are opposed or have negative opinions of interfaith dialogue” (xi). So what needs to happen first is an “intra-Muslim dialogue . . . that will educate worshippers on the meaning, scope, and the contemporary use of modern interfaith dialogue from Islamic perspectives” (xi–xii). Apparently, authors Muhammad Shafiq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer encountered more resistance to the idea than they first thought would happen.

Both authors are scholars admirably suited to write such a practical book. Unfortunately, the reader can find no bibliographic data in the book

itself. Muhammad Shafiq, who studied under the great Arab-American Muslim pioneer in interfaith dialogue, Ismail al-Faruqi, teaches Religious Studies at Rochester College and directs the Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue. As can be gleaned from the book (chapter 5, “The Abrahamic Faiths: A Case Study of Rochester’s Experience”), through his center he has organized a variety of educational programs locally for general audiences and interfaith programs between mosques, churches, and synagogues. That same chapter also details initiatives in Virginia and mentions some in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Pakistan.

Mohammed Abu-Nimer brings to this project a stellar experience in international peacebuilding. Director of the Peacebuilding and Development Institute at the American University in Washington, D.C., he is widely recognized as an expert in conflict resolution from an Islamic perspective. Apart from his conflict resolution training programs in many of the world’s most conflict-ridden areas (Israel-Palestine, where he comes from originally; Egypt, the Philippines, Sri Lanka), he has been involved in interreligious peacebuilding in the last decade, mostly through his own center in Washington, D.C., the Salam Institute for Peace and Justice – which brings us to the origin of this book.

In 2002, Fuller Theological Seminary received a Justice Department grant called the “Conflict Transformation Grant,” which it shared with the Salam Institute and the Islamic Society of North America for a series of two scholarly dialogues with evangelical scholars (myself being one of them). Another part of that grant was applied to intra-Muslim training in interreligious dialogue – hence, this book.

Though Muslim scholars have published many articles on interreligious dialogue, this is the first book-length treatment of the topic. The introduction sets the tone. Muslims in the West live in fear, and the negative stereotypes are only hardening during this presidential electoral season. A series of graphs based on the 2009 Pew survey clearly indicate the jaundiced opinion of most Americans toward Muslims – a situation even worse in Europe. Only “civic engagement and interfaith dialogue,” can build bridges and dispel misconceptions “in order to garner a positive perception about Islam and Muslims” (xxii).

Several times in the book, the authors warn practitioners not to mix proselytism with dialogue. Yet, the other great benefit of reaching out to other communities through dialogue is the opportunity to present Islam in the best possible light, which in turn will open the way for conversions down the road. At the end of the book, the authors state, “this current movement of interfaith and intra-faith dialogue will awaken the world” to the importance of respect between people of all faiths, “thereby enabling

people to live together in peace.” And then this significant phrase, “Any religion that becomes the torchbearer of this new initiative will enjoy a promising future for it will be respected and understood” (123).

Another theme running through the book is that intra-Muslim dialogue is a necessary prerequisite to interfaith dialogue. Yet, the former is more difficult than the latter – something that holds true for all religious traditions, which encompass a variety of disparate views and movements. Certainly for Shafiq and Abu-Nimer, promoting conversation and cooperation with people of other faiths is an important step in this direction.

In the first chapter (“Intra-faith and Interfaith Dialogue”), the main objections to dialogue are:

- it’s all about “ecumenism” and that’s Christian;
- the purpose is to create a new religion, with new rituals watered down for all to join;
- differences between religions are ignored.

These objections are easy to answer. Ecumenism is explained in its historical context, which is a twentieth-century Christian movement of intra-faith dialogue, culminating in the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC). So it doesn’t concern Muslims. Forming one new religion or painting over differences are also practices that have nothing to do with interfaith dialogue – which is best defined as “to hold on to one’s faith while simultaneously trying to understand another person’s faith. . . . Uniformity and agreement are not the goals; rather, collaboration and combining our different strengths for the welfare of humanity are. (2)”

The overwhelming strength of this book is its combination of practical tips on making interfaith initiatives successful (chapter 2 is a goldmine of guidelines), persuasive theological arguments from both Qur’ān and Sunnah for dialogue (chapter 3), historical examples from the life of the Prophet (the *Sira*) to the Abbasids to Andalusia (chapter 4), and the concrete examples of fruitful initiatives in Rochester (chapter 5 and the ten appendices). The only weakness I can point to in this book is one that often results from two authors writing one book – the first seven or eight pages of chapter 5 on the “Rochester Experience” are largely repetitive of the first part of the book. Nevertheless, for this outside observer deeply involved in the work of interreligious dialogue, this is a solid contribution, which I hope will elicit much more Muslim participation in interfaith activities.

David Johnston  
Visiting Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania