



ISW 2021 Book Study

Guidelines for Interfaith Conversations

What makes our future together possible is our ability to contemplate, to consider events and their meanings in narrative, cosmological, and historical contexts. . . . We are born not only into a wondrous and mysterious life space but also into communities of interpersonal reliance. These communities of care and crisis lend meaning and congruence to our lives and help to shape our collective stories.¹

Our Three Practices: ISW advocates and seeks to exemplify these three practices in our book studies: 1) contemplative reading, 2) deep listening, and 3) conversational learning.

"Contemplation is a spiritual practice that has the potential to heal, instruct, and connect us to the source of our being."²

About the Practice of Contemplative Reading: Contemplative reading is reading not only with the mind but with the heart—the heart feels what the mind is thinking. Rightly understood, it is not just a reading, but a listening with the heart. When these come together, deep listening can become a way of prayer that clarifies and enables our activities for justice. "When the heart speaks, take notes!"

In the context of interfaith study, contemplative reading can become a practice of spiritual discernment with others of different faiths. These practices can awaken us to processes of sifting what is true from what is false, especially from the lies we might choose to tell ourselves. Said in a more spiritual way, we distinguish the Real from illusion.

Communal Spiritual Exercise: When an entire community or a number of faith communities read an essay, a book, a scriptural text, or a memoir together, and then listen to one another with a contemplative spaciousness, it can become a spiritual exercise that opens spaces for personal, communal, and societal transformation. As a spiritual exercise, interfaith conversations can become moments to exercise *xenophilia*—love for strangers, for those who might be different or new among us.

¹ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), xv.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

Preparing for Interfaith Conversations

“. . . the effort to identify contemplative practices in the black church must include an interdisciplinary and interfaith approach. For this reason, Catholic dialogue partners, Islamic mystics, and indigenous traditional wisdom repositories are important to this Protestant study. These dialogue partners have been intentional about nurturing and retaining contemplative spiritual practices that open the human spirit to the heart of God writ large in the universe.”³

Speaker: Reads the book with special attention to the assigned pages. Prepares a thoughtful, 20-minute heart-based talk, and furnishes an outline to each of his or her respondents and the moderator ahead, so they can, likewise, prepare heart and mind to respond.

Respondents: Reads the book with special attention to the assigned pages. Reads the outline ahead provided by the speaker, and prepares to listen attentively to the speaker, remaining open to respond to what emerges spontaneously in the moment.

Moderator: Reads the book with special attention to the assigned pages. Exercises several responsibilities: 1) introduces the speaker and the two respondents, 2) acts as timekeeper, and 3) bears witness to the spontaneous flow of the conversation, occasionally making a judicial intervention to encourage conversation or to make room for another speaker or respondent in the flow of the conversation. Because time is short, the moderator may or may not choose to bring in a question or questions submitted in writing from the online participants.

One can liken the whole process of spontaneous conversation to improvisational jazz!
See: [Jazz and the Blues as catalysts for communal contemplation](#)

Fresno Interfaith Scholar Weekend
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³ Ibid., 5. I don't think Holmes means to be exhaustive here when she specifically names the contemplative practices of three faith traditions. Contemplative practices can be called out from many places, as Holmes seems to indicate. See pp. xiii-xv.