

3rd Interfaith Youth Dinner Dialogue: Islam advocates peace and tolerance

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October 16, 2018



How does Islam advocate for interfaith dialogue, peace, tolerance and understanding?

On Thursday August 30th, the third in a series of monthly interfaith dialogues took place. The first two dialogues tackled the Bahá'í and Mormon faiths.

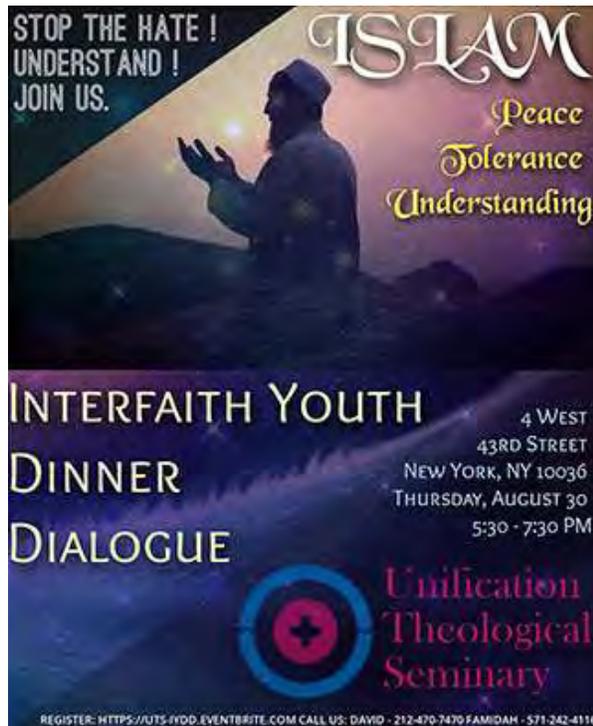
First and foremost, the topic of Islam is an appropriate topic because, this semester, UTS is currently offering an [online class on Islam](#) taught by [Dr. Drissa Koné](#). This course introduces the tradition of Islam from an authentic perspective such as the life of Muhammad, the Qur'an, central beliefs and traditions, schools of jurisprudence, the history of Islam, the social impact of Islam, and Islam's theory of war and peace.

As an interfaith seminary, the [Unification Theological Seminary](#) (UTS) seeks to engage students and the wider society, people from all religious backgrounds, in its pursuit of interfaith and peacebuilding. It is within that context that UTS has been organizing a series called Interfaith Youth Dinner Dialogue (IYDD) to learn about the differences in values, religion, and cultures as a strategy to remove prejudice, promote a peaceful coexistence and help bridge cultural and religious divides.

It should be pointed out that interfaith dialogue is necessary in our globalized world. It is a fact that globalization and diversity open the door to many challenges. A UTS professor [Charles Chesnavage](#) offered a possible solution to those challenges by proposing that this "type of program is very important for us to learn about Islam's differences from and similarities to other religions, and we should promote this interfaith program outside of this classroom." For Dr. Chesnavage our interfaith dialogue should be supported to help fight stereotypes and biases against Islam and other religions. He continued by declaring that "God created us differently so that we can show our differences by the good we do. It is a competition of goodness. We need to compete to do good around us through an interfaith initiative to help bring down all the walls of mistrust and distrust."

The Imam from Queens and the Imam from the Harlem West African community expressed similar things about the role of Islam in interfaith dialogue. For both of them, if the prophet was sent as a [mercy to the worlds](#), it is tantamount to saying that his followers must inevitably be a mercy to their neighbors and other religions. As if speaking with a unified voice, the two imams took turns and quoted the same

verse from the Holy Qur'an that translates as "there is no coercion in religion." That verse illustrates how Islam advocates for religious tolerance and prohibits forcing conversion of people to Islam. One of the basic truths established by the holy Qur'an is that no one can be forced to embrace Islam; meaning that whoever wishes to embrace Islam is free to do so, and whoever wishes to continue on other paths is also free to do so; Muslims should respect those choices. In a nutshell, the imams stressed that no one should ever be threatened or harmed in any way if they choose not to become a Muslim.



After the interfaith event, Imam Boua Diabaté confided in me that he was very moved by this type of event, the likes of which he had never attended before and he is now very eager to start taking classes at UTS in order to gain more knowledge, and learn strategies to become an interfaith ambassador. Many other attendees echoed the same feelings when I called to thank them for coming to the IYDD evening program.

Many participants shared their own stories of interfaith initiatives, but, for me, there is one that stood out. To paraphrase, a Christian evangelical said that he grew up with Muslim friends, but he never distinguished his friendship with them based on religion; they were just brothers. He thought it was important to focus more on things that unite us, such as our humanity rather than things that divide us. That's the quintessence of interfaith initiative; when we can look past our religious dogmas and considerations to see one another as brother and sisters. We can help build a more peaceful world by bridging religious and cultural divides.