

Why Muslim-Christian Dialogue?

The Certificate in Muslim-Christian Dialogue offers the opportunity to acquire foundational knowledge and build competence in core skills that will enable the student to engage confidently with individuals and groups from a tradition that is not one's own. In these studies personal religious convictions do not have to be checked at the door. Rather, these studies assume as part of their method that it is possible to listen with attentive humility, and hence to learn deeply, while still retaining and when appropriate articulating one's own deepest convictions, even if these convictions cannot for the moment be reconciled with those on the other side. In many classes the other side will be present in the person of the instructor or fellow-students. Beyond the three required courses, additional courses may be chosen to match a current interest or need. What will be called for in all these studies is active listening, openness to new data, and critical – including self-critical – reflection. In a word, this study demands dialogue.

As we expand our knowledge of the world's cultures, we sometimes come upon areas that call us to pause and dig deeper. In the Washington metropolitan area -- an immigration destination as well as a center for national and international government -- our institutions of higher learning offer rich human and documentary resources for historical, social scientific, and geographic approaches to human cultures. Each of these approaches defines its own scope, often prescribing a mandatory sequence of courses leading to an academic credential of proficiency. Each approach is committed to normative procedures for inquiry. These procedures usually include adopting an impartial, non-engaged posture. Insider accounts are subjected to outsider interpretive theory and observations, and the outsider retains the last interpretive word.

Religious studies, an approach to culture aiming to explore the deepest sources of human values, motivations, and belief, present a particular challenge. Human religions can be fruitfully scrutinized with the methods of history, social science, and geography. Yet the impartial or secular observer may come away from such study still unable to account for the power and resilience of religious traditions in human communities. The testimony of the insider, the believer, the *engagé*, is needed, on its own terms, free from an outsider's imposed last interpretive word. Only by deep listening can we seriously assess the depth of this dimension of a culture.

Muslim-Christian studies offer specific, focused knowledge about topics of immediate use to public policymakers, community leaders, people in business, pastoral workers, law enforcement personnel, social service providers, and educators whose work or residence puts them outside the boundaries of their own religious tradition and into contact with the other tradition and its living adherents. In the United States of America, and the Washington area in particular, Muslims are a tolerated, articulate, ethnically diverse, and increasingly influential minority. Christians in the Washington area are a historically dominant, ethnically diverse component of the population with complex views about their collective role in public life. Present-day social conflicts, local and global, as well as a heritage of fourteen centuries of encounter, make Muslim-Christian studies an important addition to the competence and skills of both professionals and good neighbors.

