

OF STRANGERS & ENEMIES

A Pathway to Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims

Discussion Guide

J ROBERT EAGAN

Friends –

Thank you so much for starting a discussion group based upon my book 'Of Strangers & Enemies'. I trust that you will be challenged and changed as a result. Inside this Discussion Guide you will find 5-9 questions for each section of the book that will help you dive deeper into the contents of the book, as well as to get to know one another better. I prepared these questions as a framework. Some may lead to intense conversation, and others may fall flat. Here are some suggestions that may make your discussion group more successful:

- Start by talking about what stood out to each person in the section
- Use the discussion questions to draw out deeper points or to help facilitate the discussion
- Don't rely on the questions alone. Ask yourself: What in this section matters the most to this particular group?
- Find ways to encourage your group to move beyond reading and into relationships with others in your community
- Email me any questions you have as you go along. I would be happy to help!

Also, consider inviting people that do not come from your tradition or religious background to join you in the discussion. This book is intended to foster relationships across lines of religious and cultural difference. What better way to accomplish that than to start those relationships in discussing this book? Again, I thank you for letting me be a part of helping to guide your feet on pathways of peace. I look forward to hearing about how your group goes!

Grace & Peace

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Introduction & Chapter One

1. The author writes: "I want to live in a way that makes neighbors out of strangers and enemies, but I talk myself out of it most of the time." Can you think of a situation in the past that you have talked yourself out of interacting with someone?
2. In the beginning of Chapter One, the author describes his community as very monolithic – all white and all Christian. In what ways was your community similar or different? What impact do you think your community has shaped your way of viewing 'others'?
3. "I wasn't trying to convince Jamal. I was telling him why I was convinced. I think there is a world of difference between those two statements." Do you agree with the author's distinction here? Why or why not?
4. "I am a Christian, born into a Christian context, who received a Christian message that was good for Christians to the general exclusion of everyone else after all. Whether I believed it or not, this was my foundation." How does this statement relate to your own experience of faith/religion? Do you think your faith is a result of when and where you were born? Why or why not?
5. "As we have engaged in a dialogical friendship, he has added the commitment to understanding the Bible as scripture as a part of his experience of faith as a Muslim. Likewise, I have taken on the commitment of searching for and celebrating the truth in the Qur'an as a part of my experience of faith as a Christian." What excites you about this idea? What makes you uncomfortable about this idea? Why?

Interlude & Chapter Two

1. The author makes a distinction between believing something to be literally or factually true on the one hand, and believing a story to be true because it tells us something true about God. Do you find this distinction to be helpful? Why or why not?
2. “Even though they are ‘neighbors,’ I am more prone to ignore the people around me than I am to actually get to know their stories...” Tell about a time in which you had a deep and meaningful conversation that you didn’t expect with someone you didn’t know. What was that experience like for you?
3. The author asserts that the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are “bound up in the command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.” Do you agree or disagree? Why? How does this statement differ from what you see or hear in our current cultural context?
4. “But at the heart of the word *love*, as it relates to loving our neighbors, is that it is more than a feeling; it is a way of being in the world that purposely and specifically acts on behalf of the other out of compassion and concern for his or her well-being.” How does this definition of *love* help you better understand the command to love your neighbor as yourself?
5. The author presents a nuanced understanding of who exactly is our neighbor. How would you define your neighbors? Who do you see as your particular neighbors?
6. How does the author’s argument for ‘solidarity’ with Muslims feel to you? Do you agree or disagree with his argument that non-Muslims should be showing solidarity with Muslims in America? Why? What would such solidarity look like in your life?
7. How has this chapter impacted your way of seeing ‘others’ around you?
8. What concrete, tangible steps will you take this week to demonstrate love to your particular neighbors? Get creative. Name one particular neighbor that you will seek to impact positively through an act of neighbor-love.

Interlude and Chapter Three

1. "If we are to be for peace, we have to be for *community*." How do you see individualism and isolation impacting your relationships with others?
2. How do you see your desire for safety and security impacting how you relate with strangers? Do you agree with the author's assertion that we are only as safe as we perceive ourselves to be? Why or why not?
3. The author quotes Rabbi Samson Hirsch as saying, "...our own experiences do not make us immune to Pharaoh residing in our hearts." How do you see this playing out in our current cultural context? How do you see this playing out in your own life?
4. What was new or interesting to you about the author's presentation of the Islamic *dhimmi* laws or the story of the Good Samaritan?
5. Who are your 'Samaritans'? What is difficult for you about showing compassion and mercy towards them?
6. "We never know when we will be in contact with the strangers that we meet randomly at the grocery store. The way we treat them can go a long way toward changing the context of any potential future relationship we might have with the strangers in our midst." What about the author's stories from the grocery store and the train particularly impacted you?
7. "*Love is not a hopeless endeavor*. Rather, love is the antidote, the variable in the relational equation that has a chance of making a better world in the future." Do you believe that the way we interact with strangers can change the way the world looks in the future? Why or why not?
8. How has this chapter inspired you to risk stepping out of your comfort zone to engage in conversations and relationships with strangers in your community?

Interlude and Chapter Four

1. What role has the media played in shaping the way you see 'others'? Do you believe that relationships with your 'others' do/can change your point of view? Why or why not?
2. The author uses motorcyclists as an example of his enemies. Who are some of your everyday enemies? Do you know any of them personally?
3. What do you think of the rationale Jesus gives for why we are to love our enemies (because that's what God does)? Is that compelling enough for you? What would be a better rationale?
4. In what ways have you 'loved' your enemies with a motive to convert them? Do you think this is helpful or hurtful? Why?
5. What was your reaction to the quote from Michael Hart, who claims that Jesus' teaching about loving enemies is "an intriguing but basically untried suggestion."? What examples can you give of someone loving their enemies?
6. "He is...commanding his disciples to will good and to do good to their enemies, no matter how the disciples may feel about them, and *no matter whether the enemies remain enemies despite the goodness shown to them.*" What is your response to this assertion? Are you willing to love your enemies whether or not they are transformed by your love? Why or why not?
7. The author writes that forgiveness is one way of loving one's enemies. What are some other tangible actions that demonstrate love towards enemies?
8. This love transforms us, and potentially transforms our enemies. What would happen if we turned the command to love our enemies from an 'untried suggestion' into a normal pattern of our lives? Is the risk worth the reward? Why or why not?

Interlude and Chapter Five

1. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is still as violent and divisive as ever. Do you find yourself taking sides on that issue? Why?
2. "...as bearers of the divine image, we have the ability to empathize with the oppression of the Jews and Palestinians without diminishing the reality of both." Throughout this book, the author has made a case for empathy and seeing the image of God in all human beings. How have these ideas challenged you personally?
3. "...we are not immune to radicalism related to our religion." Do you agree that extremism and radicalism are existent in all religious communities? What are some examples? Have you ever said, "That guy couldn't have been a Christian, or a Muslim, or a Jew," based upon their actions? Is that helpful or hurtful? Why?
4. What similarities do you see between what the Qur'an says and Jesus' teachings and/or Jewish teachings? What differences do you see? What is the significance of both the similarities and the differences, in your view?
5. The author writes: "Can we acknowledge at this point that the greatest opponent to peace and friendship between us may be the authorities on revealed scripture how are charged with making meaning of the scriptures?" What is your response to this question? Have you experienced religious leaders reading their own meaning into a text?
6. The author writes that we choose how we are going to read our scriptures, and that it has "ramifications for how we live in relation to all people". How have you seen this to be true in your own experience of faith?
7. "This vision of Isaiah illustrates that the Jews and Muslims (or at least Arabs) are not destined for perpetual enmity but for future worship together when God sets all things back to right." The author spends a good amount of space interacting with the story of Isaac and Ishmael. What surprised, confused, irritated, or inspired you about his treatment of that story?
8. How does the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* (healing the world) resonate with you? Do you believe that we can participate in repairing the world? What from your tradition agrees or disagrees with that concept?
9. How can we utilize the Psalms of lament in our practice of loving our enemies? Did this brief introduction to lament help you understand these Psalms in a new light? Why or why not?

Interlude and Chapter 6

1. "Life changing means that *we risk being changed* through the relationship." Does this make you feel uncomfortable? Why?
2. "...information won't change human hearts, at least not very often." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why does the author advocate so strongly for relationships over simply digesting information?
3. Have you ever experienced a 'dialogical friendship' like the one the author describes? What was good about that experience? What was difficult?
4. Which of these concepts, dialogue, empathy, or reciprocity, was most challenging to your previous way of understanding relationships? How will these concepts change the way you interact with others in the future?
5. The author outlines a Christian, Muslim, and Jewish framework for engaging in dialogical friendships. What was helpful about these different frameworks for you? How would you describe your religious reasoning for engaging in dialogical friendships differently?
6. The author presents four points from Harvard's Pluralism Project as an argument for engaging in dialogical friendships. Which of these four points did you find most instructive? Which did you find most difficult? Why?
7. The idea of dialogical friendship as a religious potluck can be troublesome or exciting. What risks do you see involved in these ideas? Are they worth taking? Is there anything that you wouldn't put on the table? Why?
8. What avenues exist in your community to begin to engage in dialogical friendships with your religious or cultural others? What steps do you need to take in order to start a new conversation? What barriers exist?

Postlude and Afterword

1. “If we don’t have any dialogical friendships across lines of religious difference, we have no chance of our love transforming strangers and enemies into neighbors.” Is this true? Why or why not?
2. The author outlined myriad ways for you to get involved in creating spaces for peace to break out in your community. Which of these ideas was most intriguing to you? What would it take to make that happen in your community?
3. Spend some time brainstorming ways that you can open up conversations and relationships across lines of religious and cultural difference in your community. What steps need to be taken to get something started? What are the biggest divisions or areas of need in your community? Who are some key leaders in your community that you need to involve? What neighbors do you need to initiate a relationship with? How can you discover/utilize organizations and programs that already exist to assist you on this journey?

You can do this. We can do this, together.