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Speaking Across Faiths: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Interfaith Dialogue in American Cultural Context

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Abstract

Grounded in Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study examines an interfaith public dialogue by integrating Hyland's metadiscourse framework and multimodal discourse analysis, with particular attention to linguistic stance-taking, spatial arrangement, and audience engagement. Framed as a conversation, the event reflects broader American discourse norms that privilege civility, authenticity, and pluralistic cooperation over institutional authority. Methodologically, the research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, incorporating corpus-based concordance data to support close textual analysis without pursuing full quantification. Drawing on visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and U.S. pluralism principles (Interfaith America, 2022), the study investigates how the speakers negotiate theological disagreement not only through verbal choices but also through spatial positioning, humor, and reflexivity. The findings reveal how strategic spatial positioning, reflexive metadiscourse, and humor can soften theological tensions and foster dialogic engagement. In the analyzed event, these strategies were particularly evident in the Muslim speaker's interactional choices, illustrating how multimodal cues mediate disagreement and build rapport. The study underscores that interfaith dialogue is co-constructed through both textual and embodied resources, offering practical insight into designing inclusive and relationally attuned interfaith encounters.

Keywords : *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); interfaith dialogue; metadiscourse; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; linguistic stance-taking*

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to common belief, language does not merely serve to transmit information. It plays a more profound role in enabling people to connect with one another, support empathy, and express emotions. These are essential in interfaith contexts, where individuals bring with them diverse beliefs, values, and faith-based discourses. In this light, language becomes a site of both potential harmony and tension, one that ultimately fosters reconciliation and understanding. Meaning is, indeed, inherently dialogic, forged in the interplay of voices and perspectives (Bakhtin, 1981). This view aligns with Habermas (1984), who positions language as the keystone of mutual understanding in the public sphere. Interfaith dialogue, while rich with promise, often falters due to a lack of clear objectives (Berkley Center, 2014), fear of diluting religious identity (Fatris, 2023), proselytizing tendencies (Fatris, 2023), ignorance and stereotyping (Brauhn, 2016), power imbalances (Abu-Nimer, 2025), overemphasis on similarities (Orton, 2016), defensive communication (Bonacci, 2011), and underlying social or political tensions (Seran, 2025). These challenges can obscure genuine engagement, reduce trust, and hinder the transformative potential of dialogue across religious boundaries.

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Specifically, this study is aimed to explore how discourse is shaped by and contributes to ideology, identity, and social structure, to analyze gesture, gaze, intonation, and spatial arrangement that reinforce or nuance the verbal discourse, and to interpret the cultural context shaping the discourse, particularly the U.S. norm of mutual respect, civic engagement, and public religiosity.

A study on interfaith dialogues conducted by Lindsay (2020) reveals the concept of humanization as "a common discursive goal of dialoguers," which can be achieved, among other means, by countering biased narratives and fostering awareness of cultural and religious diversity. Tano (2025), who studies Pope Francis's speeches, supports this idea, by identifying interreligious understanding as a key feature of this type of discourse. Another study reveals that engaging in interfaith dialogue is considered a form of obligation among Muslim scholars (Shah et al., 2013).

Religious diversity has long been an integral aspect of American society. The United States of America has frequently shifted between merely acknowledging diversity and actively cultivating pluralism, at times reacting defensively to growing differences, and at other times embracing them by fostering inclusive structures that reflect a pluralistic society (Barkey & Goudiss, 2018). These shifting attitudes toward diversity not only shape the conditions for interfaith engagement but also illuminate how discourse becomes a site for negotiating inclusion, recognition, and collective identity within pluralistic societies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study examines an interfaith dialogue conducted in the American context, featuring three religious leaders representing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and van Leeuwen's (2008) Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), this study seeks to address the following questions. (1) How do linguistic choices in the dialogue reflect each leader's ideological position and religious identity? (2) What metaphorical and rhetorical strategies are used to articulate shared values or religious distinctiveness? (3) In what ways does the American cultural context influence the tone, content, or interactional style of the dialogue?

RESEARCH METHOD

Using a descriptive-comparative method (Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011), this study employed the WordSmith 8 corpus processing software (Scott, 2020) to operationalize the first dimension of Fairclough's (1995) three-phase CDA framework, as reflected in the first research question. The software was utilized to generate concordances which played an instrumental role in the data collection stage. Specific religion-related words, pronouns, and metaphorically used words uttered by the three religious leaders were extracted from the research corpus. Although relatively small in size (approximately 15,000 words), the corpus yielded intricate and meaningful data. Nonetheless, the study remained primarily qualitative in orientation.

In alignment with the second dimension of Fairclough's (1995) CDA, this study interpreted the ways in which metaphorical and rhetorical strategies employed by the speakers facilitated

discursive resonance and established interpersonal alignment. It also considered how intertextual references, such as scriptural allusions, doctrinal echoes, or shared cultural narratives, were mobilized to invoke authority, foster familiarity, or negotiate differences across traditions. Guided by Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse, the analysis focused on how interactional resources, such as hedges, boosters, and attitude markers, shaped the speakers' stance toward their audience, and how interactive elements structured the coherence and accessibility of their messages. These features were examined in relation to how shared values or religious distinctiveness were articulated and negotiated through both explicit and implicit textual connections.

A publicly available YouTube video of an interfaith panel discussion titled *'Islam, Judaism, and Christianity – A Conversation'* (SMAADallas, 2018), along with its auto-generated transcript ([Auto-generated], 2025), served as the data sources for this study. Though dated 2018, the panel's dialogue encapsulates discursive patterns and interreligious concerns that are continually relevant for understanding interfaith engagement. Moderated by Amy Heller, featuring Imam Omar Suleiman, Rabbi David Stern, and Reverend Chris Girata, who represent Islam, Judaism, and Christianity respectively. The moderator posed ten groups of questions to the panelists, which are as follows:

1. What is a commonly held misconception about your tradition, and what would you like others to understand about that misunderstanding?
2. Do we pray to the same God?
3. Why is it that each of the religions that you serve and that we are part of, focus on differences and not similarities?
4. In your tradition and faith identity, what is the most beautiful or loving part that you personally value the most? What part of your faith gives meaning to your identity and purpose each day?
5. How does each faith tradition approach the reading of its sacred texts—literally, metaphorically, or otherwise—and how do these approaches shape worship or study? What differences or similarities exist across traditions in this regard?
6. What is the significance of head covering across different religious traditions—for both men and women? Why is it practiced, in what forms, and is it limited to worship or does it extend into broader cultural life?
7. What does each religion say or teach about interfaith marriage?
8. What is one core requirement that defines your identity within your faith?
9. What is your biggest fear as it relates to your faith in Dallas right now?
10. What is the best 'A priest, a rabbi, and an imam walk into a bar' joke that can be shared appropriately in this diverse and sacred space?

The textual data analyzed consisted of the panelists' responses to those questions (i.e., transcribed speech) which were examined according to the stages of Fairclough's (1995) CDA. The visual mode, on the other hand, included features such as gestures, spatial arrangement, and gaze, extracted from the video. These two modes were analyzed as complementary components of the multimodal discourse as suggested by van Leeuwen (2008).

To examine how the panelists position themselves interpersonally and rhetorically, this study relies on Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse markers, categorized into interactive and interactional resources, offer insight into how speakers structure their discourse and engage with their audience. These features are examined both as textual elements, aligned with the first phase of Fairclough's (1995) CDA, and as discursive strategies reflecting the second phase, where interpersonal alignment, stance, and ideological positioning come into play. The following is the table of an interpersonal model of metadiscourse proposed by Hyland (2005).

Table 1. Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse

Category	Function	Examples
Interactive	**Help to guide the reader through the text**	**resources**
Transitions	express relations between main clauses	in addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	finally; to conclude; my purpose is
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	noted above, see Fig; in section 2
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings	namely; e.g.; such as; in other words
Interactional	**Involve the reader in the text**	**Resources**
hedges	withhold commitment and open dialogue	might; perhaps; possible; about
Boosteers	emphasize certainty or close dialogue	in fact; definitely; it is clear that
Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to proposition	unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Self mentions	explicit reference to author(s)	I; we; my; me; our
Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader	consider; note; you can see that

The third phase of the analysis considers the sociocultural practices that frame the dialogue, particularly the American context of pluralism, public religiosity, and intercultural sensitivity. Within this dimension, the study interprets how broader norms and values inform the speakers' discursive choices and how their language participates in constructing a shared vision of interfaith understanding.

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RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The questions posed by the moderator effectively prompted the panelists to articulate sincere and thoughtful responses that reflected the perspectives of the faith communities they represented. The discussion addressed a wide range of interfaith topics, including the correction of common misconceptions, the expression of cherished beliefs, scriptural interpretation, ritual practices such as head coverings, interfaith marriage, and faith-based identity. It also engaged with local sociopolitical realities, including concerns about religious visibility and safety in

Dallas. The panelists, all active within Dallas-based religious communities, brought institutional and theological perspectives to the conversation, enriching the dialogue with lived insights from their respective faith traditions.

Textual elements in the interfaith discussion

Interactive metadiscourse markers

Each of the four interactive metadiscourse types, transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, and code glosses, was represented in the speakers' discourse, demonstrating a range of audience-oriented cohesive strategies in the dialogue. The moderator's introductory framing constructs the dialogue as both a theological exchange and a relational process, signaling that the panelists are engaging not only with doctrinal questions but with one another as growing interlocutors within a shared civic space. This is evident in the repeated use of transition words like ***and, so,*** and ***but*** which help build cohesion and move between ideas. While these markers are essential for coherence and logical flow in written argumentation, they are often replaced by more formal equivalents such as ***in addition*** or ***moreover, therefore*** or ***thus***, and ***however***, ***nevertheless***, or ***nonetheless***, respectively (see for example Agustin & Ngadiman, 2013; Shanthi et al., 2019). In the present interfaith dialogue, which is notably a spoken discourse, *and*, ***so***, and ***but*** were found a lot more in comparison with ***however***, for example, in the case of ***but***. The frequent and repetitive appearances of those markers, while serving the same tasks as the formal ones, also acted as hesitation fillers, just like ***well***. The following is an example of how ***and*** is used repeatedly in a stretch of utterance by the Muslim Imam serving a combination of tasks: a connector and filler.

Excerpt 1

"... okay that's the one ... I'll focus on just for a moment ***and***[1] I think it plays into a larger narrative ... Islam is a cause of destruction ***and***[2] regression ***and***[3] I'd like people to just take a moment to consider that we are a 1,400 year olds religion ***and***[4] that within Islam you had the birth of hospitals and medicine ..."

The first ***and***[1] does not coordinate full propositional content, instead it functions as a loose transitional cue, easing the transition between two thoughts. It resembles a soft floor-holding strategy or hesitation buffer. The second ***and***[2] acts as a classic coordinating function, forming a compound noun phrase denoting two linked concepts. The third ***and***[3] signals a shift from a completed clause to a new pragmatic move, helping to advance the speaker's turn. The final ***and***[4] in the excerpt exhibits more grammatical usage, as it connects two structurally complete and syntactically parallel elements: (Clause 1) " ... *that we are a 1,400-year-old religion ... "* ***and*** (Clause 2) " ...*that within Islam you had the birth of hospitals and medicine ... "*.

Another excerpt presented below reveals how the transition marker ***so*** demonstrates its ability to function not only as the classic clausal, but also as mitigated clausal and filler markers.

Excerpt 2

"Well I—I do ***so***[1] I'll be political ***so***[2] you don't have to be ***so***[3] but I think the part of... what the current cultural climate does I think is give disagreement a bad name..."

This stretch of utterance was produced by the Jewish rabbi in response to the Christian reverend, who had answered the moderator's question concerning the focus of their religions on differences rather than on similarities. Grammatically, it can be broken down into Clause 1 *"I do"* (elliptical, likely meaning "I do agree" or "I do think so") and Clause 2 *"I'll be political"*. The two clauses are connected to express a logical cause-effect proposition between the ideas. Meanwhile, the usage of the third ***so*** lacks a clear syntactic or propositional function. It does not contribute a new claim or articulate logic; rather, it serves as a discourse cue related to turn-taking or hesitation--a kind of processing delay as the speaker gathers his next thought. It may also reflect self-repair, where the speaker begins with ***so*** but shifts tactically into contrast with ***but***. It is therefore non-propositional in nature. This contrast highlights the multifunctionality of ***so*** in spontaneous spoken discourse, where it may alternate between logical coordination and pragmatic pacing within a single turn. Other examples of transition markers include ***in fact*** (giving emphasis or reinforcement), ***without*** (expressing contrast or exception framing), and ***doesn't mean*** which operates similarly to ***however***, ***yet***, or ***nevertheless***, but in a more conversational and syntactically embedded form, as in "...we have differences—that ***doesn't mean*** we don't recognize the same creator".

The following excerpt from the Muslim Imam's utterances is meant to give an illustration on the frame markers used in the dialogue.

Excerpt 3

" ... you know in the in our faith tradition we have a recognition a few layers of brotherhood ***so first*** there is one of the early Islamic scholars ... recognized a few different layers of brotherhood ***so*** they said ***first*** there's the Adamī of the the children of Adam the Brotherhood and sisterhood amongst the children of Adam that there is a universal brotherhood that exists there ***and then*** it becomes *Ibrāhīmī* an Abrahamic that there is another closeness or a distinction of Abrahamic brotherhood ... ***and then*** there is the brotherhood with in Christ and Islam and that Muslims also affirm a position a unique distinction in position of Jesus Christ peace be upon him ***and then*** there is a muhammediye which is the Muhammad's those who believe in the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him affirming a brotherhood amongst themselves ***but then*** it's really interesting because these obviously get closer and closer and closer and there are differences even amongst the followers of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him ... ".

Several frame markers were employed to structure the imam's explanation of layered brotherhoods in Islam. The sequencing was initiated with ***so first*** and continued with repeated use of ***and then*** to scaffold the unfolding typology—from *Adamī* (universal) to *Ibrāhīmī*, *Christic*, and *Muḥammadīye* forms of brotherhood. These markers signaled a clearly sequenced structure, guiding listeners through categories while maintaining cohesion. The phrase ***but then*** introduced a shift from typological framework to reflection, highlighting proximity among these categories despite doctrinal distinctions. In the next part of the same stretch of the utterance, the imam continued as follows.

Excerpt 4

" ... and ***every time*** I get asked what my politics are I say that there's one verse in the Quran that sums up my politics ... I don't want to get too political here not yet at least that I want you guys to

like me at least for the first 30 minutes because once I start getting too political they see but ***what I would say is*** that that's where that's where sectarianism that's where division becomes ripe is when there is an agenda at play and … “.

The marker ***every time*** served as a temporal frame marker, anchoring the speaker’s political ethos in recurring moments of public questioning. Finally, ***what I would say is*** framed as a forthcoming main point, softening the transition into a critical stance on sectarianism and political agendas. Collectively, these frame markers revealed a speaker who carefully guided his audience across theological, historical, and socio-political layers while maintaining coherence in spoken delivery.

Just like transition and frame markers, endophoric markers were also frequently employed throughout the conversation. Excerpts 6 and 7 illustrate instances where these markers were actively used to maintain cohesion and reference prior discourse. These two were uttered by the Jewish rabbi.

Excerpt 6

“ … Omar and I disagree. We have lots of serious and deep conversations with one another as colleagues and friends and there are things we agree on clearly and there are things we disagree on clearly. Those ***disagreements*** are precious to me, they help me clarify my own thinking … “.

Excerpt 7

“… and ***as Chris said earlier*** … “.
Several endophoric markers were employed by the rabbi to sustain cohesion and traceable reasoning across his utterances. Rather than relying on formal citation, these markers manifested through recycled phrasing and anaphoric references such as ***those disagreements,*** and ***they,*** which pointed back to prior claims about respectful theological difference. This cohesive chain enabled the speaker to build conceptual density while avoiding redundancy. Notably, in Excerpt 7, the phrase ***as Chris said earlier*** operated as an explicit endophoric device, signaling both alignment and intertextual continuity within the dialogue. Such internal referencing helped maintain thematic focus on disagreement as a constructive force, even as the conversation transitioned from doctrinal reflection to personal ethos.

Excerpt 8

“ … at the societal level Islam has a very clear social justice tradition. ***It's a liberation theology at its core*** that's that that's what's made it appealing to many of the great civil rights leaders and activists that we that we that we've had and enjoyed in this country and elsewhere … **what I mean by that is** that I think that the sanitizing of Christ the sanitizing of Moses the sanitizing of these great prophets you know … “

Code glosses featured prominently in the Imam’s utterances as seen in Excerpt 8, functioning as rhetorical bridges between theological concepts and audience understanding. A particularly important example occurred when he reformulated his previous proposition, ***it’s a liberation theology at its core,*** and then elaborated on it by saying, ***what I mean by that is***, signaling an intention to unpack the term in socially and historically grounded language. Through this

explanation, he pointed to civil rights leaders and prophetic models of justice as illustrative examples, thereby reinforcing his theological claim with accessible socio-political imagery. In doing so, he used language not simply to assert belief, but to reformulate it into a dialogic offering across religious and cultural contexts

Code glosses also appeared in the rabbi's utterances, though more sparingly and often embedded within scriptural elaboration. When he cited ***You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt,*** he immediately clarified its significance by adding that it was a reminder of the dignity and divinity in the other—thus rephrasing the verse for ethical emphasis. He further expanded on the idea by calling it ***a horizon of decency and justice and holiness*** reformulating the religious imperative into a broader moral vision. These glosses served to interpret sacred text through personal resonance, reinforcing theological values in language that made his values easy to understand.

Interactional metadiscourse markers

Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse identifies interactional markers as rhetorical tools used to engage readers and guide their involvement in the text. In this interfaith conversation, all the speakers employed the plural pronoun ***we***. And depending on the situation, they would use the inclusive or exclusive pronoun.

Omar's use of ***we***, for example, alternated strategically between inclusive and exclusive reference, functioning as both a stance and engagement marker. When affirming shared practices and beliefs among Muslims—such as the preservation of the Quran, the recognition of prophets, or the application of interpretive principles, ***we*** operated exclusively, reinforcing in-group identity and doctrinal cohesion. Phrases like ***"we believed in the original format"*** and ***"we recited the Quran in Arabic"*** positioned the speaker within the global Muslim community. Conversely, moments of humor or ethical reflection featured a more inclusive *we*, as in ***"we win"***, which potentially invited the broader audience to find common ground or admire the continuity of tradition. This inclusive use of ***we*** is illustrated further in Excerpt 9. Through this rhetorical balance, this speaker managed to affirm identity without alienating others.

Excerpt 9

" ... statistically speaking if you take the verses of violence from the Old Testament the New Testament and the Quran the percentage of the Old Testament don't get mad I'm not bad all right let's keep this yeah it's like 5.8% the New Testament was 2.8 the Quran was 2.3 so we're we're pretty you know closer but "***we win"*** ...".

In the case of hedges, the Christian speaker frequently used hedges such as ***"I think," "I tell," "I would prefer,"*** and ***"I don't think"*** to soften doctrinal assertions and emphasize interpretive flexibility. These markers showed a pastoral tone that valued interpretation and encouraged thoughtful reflection. At the same time, boosters such as ***"Scripture is central. It is the beginning,"*** or ***"It's not possible to read*** *(*our both the Old and New Testaments) ***literally"*** conveyed theological commitments with confidence, reinforcing core principles while acknowledging complexity.

While the speakers moderated their claims to sustain dialogue, their stance strategies diverged: one prioritized pastoral nuance, the other identity-affirming assertion. Building on this, they also engaged themselves with one another and with the audience in distinct ways, using direct address, inclusive pronouns, and rhetorical cues to construct rapport, assert alignment, or gently manage disagreement.

In addition to their stance strategies, the three speakers engaged with one another and their audience in distinct ways. The Christian reverend frequently used personal address (***"I tell my Bible studies..."***), second-person pronouns (***"you"***), and rhetorical prompts (***"right?"***) to foster inclusivity and reflection, while also relying on hedges to acknowledge interpretive complexity. The rabbi, on the other hand, favored dialogic provocations, as in ***"isn't that a form of sanitizing?"***, encouraging theological self-examination through respectfully framed challenges. He also affirmed his interlocutors with supportive interjections (***"yeah," "you were the first one"***), maintaining a tone of constructive inquiry. Meanwhile, the imam's discourse skillfully combined engagement markers such as direct address (***"you guys," "you know"***), and rhetorical appeals (***"let's face it"***), with expressive attitude markers. He not only expressed affection for the tradition despite doctrinal limitations ("***some hadiths that are so beautiful***," "***I wish it was authentic because I love it...***"), but also expressed disapproval with conviction ("***That's something that I reject***...."). *Excerpt 10* below illustrates this affective interplay between affective investment and evaluative precision:

Excerpt 10

" ... there are some hadiths that are so *beautiful* but they're not *authentic* from an Islamic perspective ... I wish it was *authentic* because *I love it* and *I love this attribution*. *I love the story* but ... *that's something that I reject* ... "

These features humanized his theological stance while positioning him as a sincere and emotionally attuned participant in the dialogue. Collectively, the speakers' varied engagement strategies enabled each speaker to navigate interfaith exchange through a balance of receptiveness, intellectual invitation, and ethical clarity.

Framing Shared Values and Distinctions: Metaphorical and Rhetorical Strategies

In the context of interfaith dialogue, speakers employed a range of metaphorical and rhetorical strategies to both underscore shared ethical values and affirm religious particularity. Drawing on theories of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003) and interpersonal metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005), this section explores how these strategies functioned across the three speakers.

The moderator's question concerning the aspects of religious identity that shape personal meaning, ethical orientation, and daily spiritual practice prompted the rabbi to respond metaphorically. This invitation is particularly significant within the context of pluralistic religious life in the United States, where articulating one's faith commitments in personal yet dialogically accessible terms fosters both intra- and interfaith understanding. He employed the image of "***a horizon of decency and justice and holiness"*** to articulate a vision of his tradition as ethically expansive and spiritually orienting. In Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) theory of conceptual metaphor, abstract or complex ideas are understood through more concrete and familiar

domains. In this case, the rabbi employed the concept of ***horizon***, something ever-present, perhaps beautiful, yet ultimately unreachable, to convey the aspirational and evolving nature of decency, justice, and holiness. This metaphor reflects the conceptual mapping of PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY, wherein the moral self continually strives toward an ideal destination. The image evokes not only personal devotion but also invites the audience and fellow speakers to perceive religious life as an ongoing ethical pursuit rather than a static state of belief.

The Christian reverend, by contrast, employed the metaphor of the ***"crystal of truth"*** to describe the nature of holy scripture. Literally, a crystal is a solid substance characterized by a highly ordered and repeating atomic structure, which often results in multiple facets or planes intersecting at precise angles (CrystalStones, n.d.). This intricate geometric multifacetedness appears to appeal to the reverend, as it symbolically represents the complex, multidimensional qualities of scripture. It accommodates interpretive plurality while reframing a theologically coherent vision.

As for the Muslim imam, even though he does not employ poetic metaphors like those used by the rabbi or the reverend, his rhetoric draws on conceptual imagery that frames the Qur'an as a divinely fixed text that is preserved in both form and function. He called the Quran "***the literal word of God***". The emphasis on uniform recitation and the absence of textual variation evokes metaphors of preservation, fidelity, and sacred continuity, though without framing scripture as a sealed or closed object.

Even though distinct in texture and tone, these metaphorical framings also indicate the speakers' broader rhetorical strategies and theological commitments. The table below synthesizes these elements to clarify how metaphor shapes each speaker's engagement in the interfaith dialogue.

Table 2. Comparative Mapping of Rhetorical Strategies and Metaphorical Framings

Speakers	Metaphors	Rhetorical Strategies	Positioning of scriptures	Functions in dialogue
Rabbi	Horizon of holiness	Poetic metaphorization and dialogic humility	Ethically aspirational, open to evolving interpretation	To invite moral reflection and intra -/ interfaith resonance
Reverend	Crystal of truth	hermeneutic hospitality and literary framing	Multifaceted truth, encouraging interpretive multiplicity	To affirm theological depth through interpretive generosity
Imam	Preservation and uniformity	Doctrinal legitimation and communal authority	Unchanging divine, speech, preserved in exact form	To assert authenticity and rebut misrepresentation

This comparative mapping reveals that while all three speakers draw on metaphor, their rhetorical trajectories diverge: one guiding toward ethical aspiration, another toward interpretive plurality, and the third toward doctrinal continuity.

How the American context shapes tone, content, and interactional style

Emphasis on Interfaith Civility and Pluralism

The conversation exemplifies how pluralism functions in the American cultural context. Held at St. Michael and All Angels Church in Dallas, the dialogue reflected a spirit of tolerance, humility, and interfaith friendship among all participants. The atmosphere fostered by the moderator played a crucial role in the success of the exchange. First names (David, Chris, Omar, Amy) were used throughout, signaling the informal setting, an interactional norm characteristic of American culture (Cultural Atlas, n.d.). The inclusive ***we*** recurred in all speakers' discourse, reinforcing a shared moral horizon. While maintaining respect, expressions like ***you guys*** added warmth and suggested interpersonal closeness. The imam's humorous disclaimer, "***Don't get mad, David, you know I love you***", exemplifies an American pattern of strategic facework, softening potential disagreement through affective affirmation. Humor, in this context, emerges as a vital discourse device: interfaith dialogue, by its very nature, can be fraught with theological tension and the risk of misalignment. Laughter, then, becomes a gentle means of disarming conflict before it escalates. It is telling, therefore, that the moderator chose to close the discussion with a light-hearted prompt, asking what kind of joke might arise when a rabbi, an imam, and a reverend walk into a bar.

Another important aspect of the conversation was that the speakers did not simply cite religious scriptures, but also grounded their remarks in personal experience and moral reflection. When the rabbi spoke of the "***horizon of decency and justice and holiness***," he offered an ethical vision rooted in personal perception rather than doctrinal exposition. The reverend echoed this pattern, suggesting that scripture should be read "***literately, not literally***," and highlighting how some Christians misuse biblical texts to justify oppression. His stance drew on lived experience, historical awareness, and moral discernment, emphasizing the ethical consequences of interpretation over strict adherence to theological orthodoxy.

The imam's approach, while more explicitly grounded in theological continuity, revealed a strategic layering of relational tone and scriptural reference. Rather than relying solely on abstract doctrine, he framed Islam's connection to Judaism and Christianity through shared terminology, prophetic lineage, and Qur'anic appeals to unity. For example, he stated, ***"The name Allah is actually the same word that is used in the Arabic Bible… Arab Christians say 'Allahu Akbar.'"*** By offering these examples, he disarmed potential misunderstandings around the term ***Allah*** and established linguistic overlap as theological common ground. He frequently cited verses from the Qur'an to demonstrate that interfaith unity is firmly rooted in Islamic tradition, such as when he referenced: ***"Say, O People of the Book, come to a common word… our God and your God is one."*** Through this scriptural grounding, he sought to provide doctrinal legitimation for pluralism and reinforce the theological basis of shared belief. His affirmation, ***"We are… calling upon the same God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad",*** further positioned Islam within the same prophetic lineage as Judaism and Christianity, emphasizing historical and theological continuity across the Abrahamic faiths. These rhetorical gestures, subtle though they may be, reflect broader American public values: religious tolerance, mutual recognition, and dialogic cooperation, values frequently nurtured in pluralistic, public-facing discourse.

Multimodality in the interfaith conversation

It is noteworthy that the term ***conversation*** was selected as the title of the video under investigation. According to the *Collins English Dictionary* ("Conversation," n.d.) the word denotes "informal interchange of thoughts, information, etc., by spoken words; oral communication between persons; talk; colloquy." This choice of title may reflect the actual character of the event as it unfolded. Despite taking place on a stage before a live audience, the exchange adopted an unexpectedly informal and spontaneous tone, aligning with the core attributes of a conversation. This aligns with the contemporary ethos of many interfaith initiatives, which prioritize dialogic cooperation and mutual recognition over theological confrontation (Helde, 2021). Moreover, the designation of the event as a conversation may reflect broader American public discourse values, where civility, authenticity, and personal experience are often privileged over hierarchical authority or institutional speech.

Moreover, the designation of the event as a *conversation* may reflect broader American public discourse values, where civility, authenticity, and personal experience are often privileged over hierarchical authority or institutional speech. This informality extended beyond language to the physical staging of the event, which also appeared carefully considered. Notably, the Muslim imam was seated between the reverend and the rabbi, a placement that invited interpretation, not only from the researcher's perspective but also among the participants themselves. At one point, the imam remarked with a smile, "***I know you guys put me in the middle for a reason***," which elicited laughter.

In multimodal discourse, spatial arrangement contributes meaning alongside speech. The imam's central position on stage was likely not incidental; it carried indexical weight. In Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006), the center often holds ideal-real or mediator status, the point that reconciles oppositional poles. The imam's playful comment shows that he was aware of how the event was set up and what his position on stage might suggest. The lighthearted comment followed a moment of theological tension, where he and the Rabbi disagreed over whether rejecting problematic prophetic portrayals constitutes sanitizing. His humor served to ease the weight of that disagreement, momentarily shifting the tone from critical challenge to shared amusement. In other words, he briefly blurred the boundary between formal panelist and conversational peer—bridging not only the gap between himself and the other speakers, but also fostering a sense of intimacy with the audience, who were invited to share in the humor and informality of the moment.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of Hyland's metadiscourse framework, this interfaith event reveals how speakers use both textual and interpersonal markers to construct alignment, manage stance, and guide audience interpretation. Markers of self-awareness, engagement, and attitude, such as hedges, boosters, metaphors, and humor, play a key role in shaping not only what is said, but how it is *relationally* received.

Framed as a *conversation*, the event privileges a tone of openness and relational exchange, consistent with American discourse norms that emphasize authenticity, civility, and personal experience over institutional authority. This communicative ethos is further shaped by the U.S.

context of religious pluralism, where public expressions of faith often favor cooperation and mutual respect. As articulated in Interfaith America's Pluralism Framework (2022), pluralism involves respect for diverse identities, mutually inspiring relationships, and cooperation for the common good, even amid deep differences.

Ultimately, this multimodal interplay of verbal, spatial, and interpersonal choices illustrates how interfaith dialogue is negotiated not only through doctrinal content, but also through the linguistic and embodied resources speakers use to co-construct meaning, manage tension, and foster mutual recognition.

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