

## **Of Visions, Methodologies and Movements: Interfaith Youth Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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I generally begin my talks by quoting Harvard faculty, staff and associates on America's growing religious diversity. As the people in this room are the primary source for many of those facts and insights, allow me to begin with gratitude instead of sociology. The work done by Diana, Grove, Ali, Patrice, Victor, Dorothy and others seated here was the intellectual inspiration behind my organization, the Interfaith Youth Core. Grove has called the Pluralism Project the mothership of the interfaith youth movement. The Interfaith Youth Core and I are proud to be one of its thriving children.

Given that people in this room are hyper-aware of America's religious diversity, let me open by saying that one of the most serious implications of that diversity is the question of how America's Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Wiccans, Sikhs and others, as they live, study and work in increasingly close quarters, are going to interact with one another. Will their relations be characterized by ignorance, suspicion, hatred and violence? Is the interaction going to dilute all of our religious identities, either into some universal spiritual mush or into an areligious secularism? Or are we going to maintain our particular religious identities, attempt to understand one another and work together for some common end? As Wilfred Cantwell Smith put it forty years ago: "The problem of our age is for us all to learn to live together with our seriously different traditions not only in peace but in some sort of mutual trust and mutual loyalty" (*The Faith of Other Men*).

At his Martin Marty lecture at the 2003 AAR in Atlanta, Princeton sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow was asked how he thought faith communities were adapting to the reality of religious diversity. He used the metaphor of an elevator: Christians, Muslims, Jews and the rest of America's religious diversity are all riding in it together, we are increasingly aware of the other people around us, but we're doing just about everything we can to avoid real interaction.

This is what Diana Eck would call diversity that has not yet achieved pluralism, because it lacks intentional and appreciative relations. A glance at the social spaces in America indicates why.

There are many places in our society where people from particular religious communities come together to talk about religion. They are called synagogues, churches, mosques and temples. There are increasing numbers of spaces where people from diverse religious communities gather. These include public schools, shopping malls, universities, YMCAs, corporations. But there are precious few spaces where people from diverse religions come together and are intentional about matters of religion.

Let me offer a real-life example of the division of "inter" and "faith" that I believe is a common experience in American life. It takes place in the cafeteria of my middle-class

suburban high school in the early 90s. The group I ate lunch with included a Jew, a Mormon, a Hindu and a Lutheran. We were all religious to a degree, but we almost never talked about our religion with each other. Often, somebody would announce at the table that they couldn't eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a certain period of time. Or somebody would say that they couldn't play basketball over the weekend because "of some prayer thing" they were being forced to go to. We all knew religion hovered behind these behaviors, but nobody ever offered any deeper explanation than "my mom said" and nobody ever asked for one.

On some level, this silent pact probably relieved all of us. None of us were equipped with a language that would allow us to explain our faith convictions to people outside of our faith communities. The reason is simple - we were never taught one. In my case, my religious education consisted of learning the private language of the Ismaili Muslim faith - the prayers, the devotional songs, the rites and ceremonies. It was a language which served me well within the Ismaili Muslim community but felt irrelevant in other situations. I felt I had to leave the Ismaili Muslim part of myself behind when I entered the diversity of the public square. Moreover, within my faith community we rarely had a conversation about what my life outside the prayer hall meant for my life inside it.

I take this notion of "languages" from the Chief Rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks. With scholars like Martin Marty, Robert Bellah and John Rawls, Sacks sees the ideal of the pluralist society as a "community of communities." The challenge is to nurture commitments to parochial communities, characterized by race, religion and ethnicity, and to the broader society. To achieve this, Sacks claims that we have to learn two languages. He writes: "There is a first and public language of citizenship that we have to learn if we are to learn to live together. And there is a variety of second languages which connect us to our local framework of relationships" (1991). Implicit is the sense that one's community identity is connected to one's citizen identity. Ideally, what makes you a more faithful Jew or Muslim or Christian should also make you a better citizen.

The importance of learning a public language of faith was brought home to me in a recent conversation with one of my best friends from high school, a Jew. There were a group of kids in my high school who took up scrawling anti-semitic slurs on classroom desks and shouting similar obscene comments in the hallways. Most students ignored this behavior, but a handful of people I knew snickered approvingly at these comments. My attention was probably focused on raising my pre-calc grade out of the gutter, and there was a part of me relieved that my kind weren't in the target range, so I ignored both the blatant anti-semitism and the hangers-on. Years later, my Jewish friend shared with me how deeply those comments cut him, and worse, how he felt betrayed by the silence of the people he thought were his close friends.

I apologized for my complicity in his suffering. He accepted this apology, and then stated, "I wonder if any of you even realized I was Jewish. None of us ever talked about religion." This revelation does not excuse our inaction in those days, but it does highlight the dangers of diversity without pluralism. Had the high school bullies chosen to go after Muslims, I think I

would have suffered alone, like my Jewish friend. I had not made that private part of myself public.

Creating and expanding the spaces where religiously diverse people gather to work on matters of religious diversity is the task of interfaith organizations. The goal of interfaith work is intimated by the term itself. Let us understand the "inter" part to mean our relationships with other people, especially those from different traditions. "Inter" was the scene at my high school lunch table. And let us understand the "faith" part in the Cantwell Smith sense, the relationships individuals have with the cumulative historical religious tradition. As I suggested earlier, there is plenty of "inter" in our society, and a good bit of "faith," but not enough interfaith. "Interfaith" is when our experience of the diversity of modern life and our connections to our religious traditions cohere such that we develop faith identities which encourages us to interact with others in intentional and appreciative ways. It is the goal of being rooted in our own traditions and in relationship with others. Because the active elements of interfaith work are religious identity and religious interaction, the two perspectives that interfaith work sees from are that of the religious community and that of the diverse society. Michel Walzer has said that the challenge of a diverse society is to "embrace difference and maintain a common life" (*What it Means to be an American*). Turn that around and you have the challenge of the religious community - to embrace a common life while maintaining its difference.

I'd like to trace the different approaches to interfaith work that I have experienced over the past seven years, articulate what I see as the main problem of each approach and then move into the rationale, vision and program of the Interfaith Youth Core.

There is a school of interfaith work that puts the emphasis on spiritual matters. The sharing of spiritual practices and the readings of great mystics are central to this approach. The second school can be called the interfaith bazaar and believes that interfaith work should be about bringing together the widest possible variety of spiritual paths and religious traditions in a big fair so that people can choose the one that is right for them. A third school takes what may be called the "religious studies" approach to interfaith work. The comparison of texts, doctrines, laws and histories are key for this group, often in an attempt to illustrate the shared ethics and overlapping histories of religious communities. A fourth school of interfaith work sees the resources of religion - texts, leaders, money, people - as an important component in solving world problems such as war, poverty and environmental degradation. A fifth school thinks that it is important to have fancy dinners and colorful ceremonies populated by the leadership of various religious communities, all outfitted in traditional garb and standing shoulder to shoulder on stage for a photo-op, or sitting politely next to one another trying to identify the vegetarian food they have been served. A sixth school sees the primary purpose of interfaith work to bring together religious progressives to combat religious conservatives.

These various schools all serve important purposes, but they also have very real problems. The spiritualist approach often blurs the boundaries between religious traditions and makes those who consider matters of prayer and devotion private space very uncomfortable. The interfaith bazaar approach completely dismisses the emphasis that

most religious communities place on passing their tradition onto future generations. The religious studies approach is limited to those learned in multiple religious traditions and often does not take into account that finding similarities between, say Islam and Judaism, does not automatically build better relationships between Muslims and Jews. The 'problem-solving' approach is largely dismissive of the self-understanding and priorities of religious communities. The ceremonial approach, taken alone, rarely reaches beyond dinners, photo-ops and polite greetings between religious leaders. The progressive political approach runs the risk of implying that the interfaith movement is the left wing of the democratic party in theological garb, and anybody who votes Republican or flirts with exclusivist theology is disqualified from the project of building interfaith understanding and cooperation.

There is, I believe, a problem common to all of these approaches. They have not managed to sustain a youth movement. Interfaith events are largely populated by people over 55. Let us juxtapose this observation against two other realities: 1) Many of the movements that are diametrically opposed to interfaith understanding and cooperation seem to be swarming with teenagers and twenty-somethings; and 2) So many of our role models of interfaith understanding and cooperation - King, Gandhi, HH the Dalai Lama, Bonhoeffer, HH the Aga Khan, and Dorothy Day - to name a few - became influential leaders when they were relatively young.

It was the absence of youth participation that particularly struck me when I first started attending interfaith events in the mid-1990s. And, although deeply appreciative of my own learning in these interfaith conferences, something else seemed missing - a concrete commitment to service. Two things were clear to me: 1) There were other young people, like me, who were committed both to their faith identities and to creating respectful and appreciative relations across religious communities; 2) My generation was drawn to service. Most of the people I knew in college were involved in some sort of regular volunteering, and many of them joined Teach for America, City Year, Public Allies or another full-time volunteer commitment after graduating. Moreover, many of those national service programs intentionally brought people from diverse race, class, gender and geographic communities together, believing that different identity-based perspectives would strengthen the service contribution, and that service was a common table where people from different backgrounds could build understanding. But religion was not a factor that these programs considered in their diversity matrices.

In the summer of 1998, at an interfaith conference at Stanford University, a big idea hit me: What if we built an organization that brought young people from different religious communities together to do service projects? It would add a youth dimension and a service component to interfaith work, and a religion aspect to the youth-service-diversity movement.

Over the course of the past six years, most of them during my graduate school years at Oxford, I have worked with dozens of other young people in this country and across the world to build this organization. We are now based in Chicago with a full-time staff of seven, a budget of approximately \$400,000 and strong local and national programs that

will impact at least 10,000 people this year. Four years ago, when the Interfaith Youth Core was in its early stages, Diana and Dorothy served an IFYC colleague and me coffee in the gardens of Lowell House and provided crucial spiritual and intellectual guidance to our work. I don't know if you know how much that meant to us, and I am eternally grateful to you for your support and counsel at that time.

The Interfaith Youth Core articulates its mission this way: There are hundreds of millions of religiously diverse young people in our world, and they are increasingly interacting with one each other. The nature of their interaction has major implications for the persistence of religious identity, the strength of civil societies and the stability of global politics. There are many forces in our world which encourage this interaction in the direction of bias, hatred and violence. The Interfaith Youth Core is nurturing this interaction in the direction of strengthening religious identity, encouraging understanding between religious communities and facilitating cooperative service for the common good.

The Interfaith Youth Core uses an interfaith shared-values / service-learning model. We bring religiously diverse 14-25 year olds together, mostly through their congregation- or campus-based youth groups, to discuss how their different traditions "speak to" shared values such as hospitality, service, pluralism and peace, and participate in service projects which put those values in action. Sometimes the discussions come first, sometimes the projects come first. As much as possible, we try to connect the actual service and the interfaith discussion.

The simple genius of the shared values approach is that it highlights things we share universally while creating the space for each community to articulate its unique riff on the value. In a discussion on the shared value of hospitality, Muslims might cite what they do for iftar and the Hadith of the Prophet, Jews might talk about their shabbat practice and scripture from Exodus, and Christians might discuss their church's tradition on Christmas and the example of Jesus in Matthew 25.

By speaking from their own traditions, participants find their faith deepened. This directly addresses the most pressing fear that parents and religious leaders have regarding interfaith youth work - the "you better not turn my Muslim into a Buddhist" problem. It also avoids the pitfall of immediately getting into competing claims - the "it was Isaac, no it was Ishmael" problem. They also find that shared values is a language of faith that is relevant to the world of "inter." Jews, Muslims and Christians can all cite how their scriptures and holidays command them to provide hospitality. They discover that their stories can live side by side, even mutually enriching one another, and motivate them towards cooperative service together.

The Interfaith Youth Core is thinking big. We want to build an organization that puts an idea in the culture - if you are young and religious part of what you should be about is coming together with people who are like you and different than you to strengthen your own religious identity, to build understanding between religious communities and to cooperate to serve others. I'd like to be on a Sunday morning talk show with Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell and say that America's civic fabric would be greatly strengthened if people

from different backgrounds would come together to build understanding with one another and cooperate to serve the broader society. And if they disagree with that, I'm interested in what country they think they live in.

We want to build an organization that, amidst very real theological differences and political problems, keeps alive the possibility that the world's diverse religious communities can choose to relate on their shared values rather than their myriad differences.

We want to build an organization that encourages every hometown in America with religious diversity to engage that diversity in a way that builds pluralism. We think that interfaith service projects is the best way to do that. This year we are coordinating our first National Day of Interfaith Youth Service on April 25 across 20 cities. Like every ambitious nonprofit, we hope Oprah will pick up on it.

We want to build an organization that can provide educational material to religious congregations who want to teach that their tradition is particular, but shares important values with other religions as well. We are piloting our curriculum in Chicago, where nearly a thousand high school and college students have already experienced it.

We want to build an organization that develops the intellectual dimensions of the field of interfaith youth work. Last year, I taught a course at Seabury Seminary and Northwestern University on this topic, and Patrice and I are co-editing a book that gathers over twenty articles mapping the field of interfaith youth work. We hope in five years that seminaries and universities across the country have courses in interfaith youth work, and that there is a thriving literature in this field.

We want to build an organization that is networking people already doing this work. The Interfaith Youth Core will host an Annual National Interfaith Youth Work conference in Chicago. Last year we drew about 40 people, and this year, with the help of a generous Pluralism Project grant, we expect to draw twice that. The conference is a place for academics, interfaith organizers, religious leaders, educators and students to come together to exchange best practices and discuss theoretical issues in interfaith work; and to decide on next steps for the movement.

We want to build an organization that is constantly nurturing new leadership, especially by teaching the skill set and knowledge base required to be an interfaith organizer. We have an intensive program called the Chicago Youth Council where a small group of religiously diverse high school students gather weekly for in-depth interfaith discussions. They also serve as a planning and leadership team for large interfaith service projects in Chicago. We also have several college interns at any given time. Last summer it was five, and this summer we look forward to having another excellent crop with us, including Christina Wright.

I'm not sure if Diana remembers this, but four years ago when I met with her and described the vision of the Interfaith Youth Core, she commented, "You guys are going to be leading the interfaith movement in ten years." Well, we took that to heart.

Clearly, this is ambitious. I'm not sure if we'll ever get there, but here is what I don't doubt: The world is not getting any less religiously diverse. The forces who are encouraging bias, bigotry and violence between religious communities think big and make their ideas flesh and blood. And God created humanity diverse so that we could live righteously and harmoniously with one another.

So dreaming a vision worthy of this reality is required.