Building Religious Pluralism: The Interfaith Youth Core Approach

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We often begin our Interfaith Youth Core workshops by asking the college students we work with to think about the last time they have seen religion on television, the last time they have opened a newspaper or turned on the radio to a story about religion. We ask them to generalize: What are the dominant stories of the role of religion in the world?

"Religion poisons everything," the sharp subtitle of Hitchens' *God is Not Great* inevitably comes up, as does Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations." "Religion makes you judgmental;" "All Muslims are terrorists;" "Religion is opposed to science."

It is very easy to shout out the darker narratives. So, we ask: are there any positive stories that the students can think of? We will get some tentative thoughts about the possibility for religious groups to do good in the world, caring about things like AIDS or poverty or the environment, but these ideas are much less clear in their mind.

Now, we ask the students, how do these stories correspond to the reality of religion that they have lived? How do they correspond to the way that they are religious, or to the religious people that they know? And further, what, we ask, does it mean that the stories of religion that dominate our popular imagination

are often so distant from the lived reality of religion that these young people know?

We can, of course, point out that it is much easier for the news to tell stories of wars and conflict than of the every day, common life and common good that most of the young people we work with live out. That said, it is important to realize the disconnect here, and to ask how much the way we tell the story shapes the way the story is played out, or as Zachary Karabell has put it in *Peace Be Upon You*, his look at 14 centuries of interreligious cooperation and conflict,

> *…Perhaps times of death and war leave a more lasting impression than periods of peace and calm. Maybe turmoil and confrontations sear the memory more deeply. But there are consequences to our selective readings…History is a vast canvas, where it is possible to find support for nearly every belief, every statement about human nature, and every possible outcome of the present. That does make history any less important, but it is up to each of us to use it well (Karabell, 2007, 5-6).*

The Interfaith Youth Core is a Chicago-based, international non-profit organization committed to working with young people and those who work with young people, to tell and build a different story about religion. What does it mean, we ask, to be living in a time of increased global interaction across differences, to be living in a time where young people are often at the forefront of this interaction? What kinds of stories, tools and skills are we giving young people to build positive relationships across those differences, particularly across religious differences?

Diana Eck (2006), looking at the reality of religious diversity, observes that it is not enough to simply have diversity, the mere existence of difference in a common civic space, but instead, that diversity needs to be actively and intentionally engaged, in what she calls *pluralism*. Similarly, Ashutosh Varshney's *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (2002) points to the importance of civic engagement. Looking at demographically identical societies in India, Varshney asks: "What leads one society to remain peaceful in

times of national ethnic conflict, while the other erupts in violence?" (2002, 81) Varshney finds that it is interethnic or intercommunal networks of civic engagement, modes of association that bring together people across religious and ethnic differences for a shared investment in a given community. Intentionally building such networks, Varshney (2002) suggests, actually leads to a stronger and more peaceful civic society. Drawing from both Eck (2006) and Varshney (2002), then, we define religious pluralism in three points: (1) a respect for individual religious identity (and equally, respect for those who claim no religious identity) (2) mutually enriching relationships across religious difference, and (3) the enactment of common action for the common good.

By working with high schools, colleges and universities, civic institutions, and faith communities, Interfaith Youth Core is building a movement of religious pluralism. Our methodology takes the idea of religious pluralism and equips young people to enact it on a grassroots level, creating intentional networks of civic engagement through the following:

Story-telling. Young people who participate in interfaith dialogue are often not scholars of their religious tradition. They are, however, scholars of their own experience, the experiences of being a young person of faith, living that faith out in a religiously diverse world. Instead of having a dialogue that focuses on politics or theology, that asks, "What do Christians, Hindus and Muslims think about the nature of God?" or starting a Jewish-Muslim dialogue with Israel-Palestine, we ask young people to tell stories: the stories of the ways that they live out their faith, the ways that they have experienced tradition. Not only is story-telling an empowering practice, but it also is a pragmatic tool for dialogue: as one teller speaks, her story will often evoke a similar but different story in her listener, who is then empowered to tell his story.

Shared values. In the words of ethics philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre, "I can't tell you what I am to do unless I first tell you the stories of which I am a part" (1984, 216). Religions themselves have stories to tell, and stories about how believers

are to act. We focus on these stories of action, and push towards
the common good: What do Christians, Muslims, and Jews all
think about compassion? About mercy? About justice? About
hospitality? The point here is not to be reductionistic, and we
very deliberately emphasize that the ways that Buddhists and
Jews understand hospitality are not very different. We are not
saying that all religions are the same. Instead, we are asking a
question: If you believe deeply, as a religious person, in
hospitality, might we not find a way to enact that hospitality
collectively, even if the ways in which, and the reasons why we
understand it are very different? Might we not still work
together, acknowledging our differences while also enacting our
shared commitment to a common civic space?

Service learning.   The third piece of Interfaith Youth Core's
methodology picks up on exactly this question, suggesting one of
the strongest methods for interfaith interaction are those which
build precisely the networks of civic engagement that Varshney
(2002) points to. The practice of service-learning encourages
young people not just to do service to their community, but to
also learn from the community alongside which they are serving.
It asks that those serving know deeply the work they are doing
and why, and asks them to be invested in the well-being of the
community far beyond the completion of a particular service
project. When that shared investment and engagement brings
together young people of different religious faith – or of no faith
at all – they begin to see one another no longer as other or
outside, but as partners in the common good.

    These three pieces are not meant to be linear, but rather
complimentary, each feeding into and reinforcing the others.
Often young people will first encounter religious pluralism by
first participating in an interfaith service-learning project, by first
experiencing the reality of working with someone who is
different than them, and only later having the opportunity to
reflect and process this. Just as frequently, the students we work
with have been engaged in esoteric theological interfaith
dialogue, and have never stopped to think about how they might
work in the world with those they are dialoguing with.

The question, "What are the stories of religion being told in the world today?" resonates with students because it allows them to place the interfaith work they are doing or are striving to do on their campuses into a larger context, a context in which their peace-building might in fact have something to say about a so-called clash of civilizations. Religious pluralism gives them a methodology to tell a new story. A case in point: In 2002, a group of three students – a Jew, a Muslim and an Evangelical Christian – were trained in the Interfaith Youth Core's religious pluralism methodology. Their school – the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign – had been fraught with interfaith tensions to the point of near-violence. Returning to campus, the three students began a new program, Interfaith Action, which focused on bringing together students from different backgrounds for sustained, long-term service projects that strengthened the local community and allowed students collectively to explore their calls to service. Over the course of the year, the interreligious conflict all but disappeared, and Interfaith Action continues to run exceptional programs, culminating each spring in a major, campus wide interfaith service project as a part of our Days of Interfaith Youth Service Campaign. The three students involved have each gone on to become professional leaders in their respective religious traditions, and continue to foster interfaith work in their communities.

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