

Interfaith Engagement as a Tool for Social Justice

Introduction

After the Boston marathon bombing in 2013, Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, published an article stating that this tragedy had occurred because of the lack of emphasis on interfaith engagement in the US.¹ He argued that interfaith engagement does three different things for society. It helps people to come to terms with the multiplicity of their own identity, helps society separate the bad aspects of a community or religion from the good, and reminds citizens that America welcomes diversity and pluralistic cooperation. As a response, Lucia Hulsether published her own piece arguing that the interfaith engagement for which Eboo Patel advocates does not actually pacify religious violence or strengthen society.² To defend her claim, she picked four core issues out of his article. She argues that his framework ignores many contributing factors because he simply shifts focus to the religious aspect of the conflict, that it promotes polarizing binaries, that it is inherently nationalistic, and that there are other clandestine goals of interfaith engagement that need to be addressed.

Patel responded with another article and Hulsether was later interviewed, but there was no resolution to this online debate. Instead, it shed light on the fact that there is no consensus, especially among scholars, about what the role of interfaith engagement should be. Additionally, there is no obvious consensus of structure in the many interfaith organizations in the US that would resolve this tension. Each organization creates its own mission and methods. In this paper, I argue that interfaith engagement has the role of being an effective tool, within the context of a pluralistic US society, for uniting people of faith to act together to further the wellbeing of their

¹ Patel, "Why Interfaith Efforts Matter More Than Ever."

² Hulsether, "Can Interfaith Dialogue Cure Religious Violence?"

communities. In order to be effective in social transformation and justice, interfaith organizations need to continue in their efforts for education and relationships, while working to move beyond service toward action.

US as Pluralistic:

Although the United States began as a nation founded primarily on Christian principles, it has become, especially within the last fifty years, an incredibly diverse and pluralistic nation.³ Eck argues that this change began after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, when the US began to allow more immigrants to enter the country and become citizens. At this point in time, more diverse people began to not only come to the US, but also stay and create communities that preserved their own cultures, different from those typical of the US. She explains that diversity, though, is not equivalent to pluralism.⁴ In order to achieve pluralism, different communities need to recognize each other instead of just existing together. This phenomenon can be seen in the United States by the significant amount of community centers that celebrate a certain culture, inviting members of other communities to learn about the culture and celebrate alongside them. Because they invite in members of other communities to join them in their own culture, and other people do indeed come, this counts for an example of pluralism. The government also endorsed pluralism when presidents positively addressed non-Christian, non-white communities. President John F. Kennedy advocated for anti-discrimination legislation, making an effort to welcome the immigrants and have the nation accept their cultures in society.⁵ President William Clinton wrote a letter to the Sikh communities, expressing gratitude for the

³ Eck, *A New Religious America*, 1.

⁴ Eck, 22.

⁵ Eck, 6.

presence of the communities in the US and the contributions of their congregations.⁶ In the US, this cultural pluralism includes religious pluralism, which is defined as a “multiplicity of individuals and communities [that] recognize each other as parallel forms of the phenomenon called religion.”⁷ This specifically religious pluralism is evident in the same ways previously discussed, as these communities, like the Sikhs to whom President Clinton wrote, are often specifically religious. As Eck describes, religious pluralism is simply a social reality in the US at this point in time.⁸ Even Hulsether, mentioned earlier, would agree that the US currently is pluralistic- she would just argue against how interfaith engagement and the pluralism it promotes has become a political agenda. Within this essay, pluralism should be seen as a social reality in the US context, not necessarily as a reality or desire for every nation.

Importance of Interfaith Engagement:

Another piece of evidence to show the pluralistic nature of the US is the amount of interfaith organizations that exist. In my paper and through my research, I define “interfaith engagement” as a space in which members of different religious traditions, including nonreligious people and not including different congregations of the same religion or different sects of the same religion, intentionally come together based on their differing faith identities. In other words, these are spaces that contribute to the pluralistic nature of the US. The interfaith organizations that I refer to are groups or programs that focus on created spaces for interfaith engagement. I use the word “interfaith” as opposed to “inter-religious”, “multi-faith”, or “multi-religious” because it is the word chose by the organizations that I studied. It is the label that they

⁶ Eck, 7.

⁷ Bender and Klassen, *After Pluralism*, 1.

⁸ Eck, *A New Religious America*.

use for themselves, therefore it is the label that I will use in describing their work. In this section, I will argue that the broader role of interfaith engagement in a pluralistic society is to unite religious congregations in order to act for systematic justice to better their communities. I will also address some of the misinformed perspectives of what many people see as what these organizations ultimately strive to do.

What its role is:

Interfaith engagement provides an effective way for communities to engage in social transformation, across traditional barriers. As previously mentioned, there are many interfaith organizations in the United States, none of them exactly the same as another. Yet, most of these organizations state that the reason to engage in interfaith work is to better the community and/or advocate for justice. This reasoning is most often not stated clearly in the mission statement provided. The mission statement normally addresses more tangible aims, instead of the vision of the organization. But when describing why the organization exists or why it was created, they give insight to the vision that inspires the work. From the Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington that was created in 1950 to the White House Interfaith Initiative started in 2011, which motivated many college campuses to create interfaith programs, the stated vision for these organizations includes social justice and working toward the common good. There is a noticeable initiative among college campuses to create these interfaith organizations, especially following the White House Interfaith Initiative. These organizations put forth the idea of social justice less often than the other organizations or they simply say that they aim to serve. I argue, though, that, because they have responded to the White House Interfaith Initiative, which does state that these groups should strive towards to common good, the role and vision of these campus initiatives is the same as the other organizations. Therefore, let the purpose of striving

toward the common good, set forth by the organizations themselves, be set as the standard to which these organizations are held.

Working towards social transformation for the common good is one of the unique roles of interfaith engagement in US society, due to the importance placed on religious by the people. Religious communities are uniquely positioned in the United States to have a great impact: they have a large amount of influence, both morally and simply because of the sheer size of religious people in the US. When asked why workers should partner with faith congregations, Kim Bobo, founder of the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement, explained that religion matters to the citizens of the US; public perception makes a difference in organizing social justice efforts.⁹ When the public see that a religious organization stands behind a movement, there is a sort of legitimization that takes place, as was seen with the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Religious organizations provide more than simply human presence or manpower to a movement. They add momentum and legitimacy. When there are different faith organizations that all support the same movement, the legitimacy magnifies. This multiplication occurs not only because people from other faith groups join in, but because the union of multiple faith congregations shows that people are passionate enough about the issue that they are willing to cross traditional religious borders in order to address the problem. Therefore interfaith engagements should be the means to mobilize to effectively engage in social justice. Properly structured interfaith movements must strive towards their greater purpose by uniting multiple faith groups for social transformation in their community.

What its role is NOT:

⁹ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*; Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom”; McCartin, “Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement.”

Many scholars currently contest the role of interfaith engagement in a pluralistic society. Some interfaith organizations seem to be used as a “Trojan horse” for the US government to build up nationalism.¹⁰ In other words, people take for granted that all interfaith organizations are beneficial to the community and so they don’t look deeper to assess what the organizations are really doing. The argument is that, in interfaith engagement, the US is portrayed as a government that supports pluralism and that pluralism is inherently good. People then learn they should be proud to be American because it means they can live in a pluralistic society. So, people take for granted that interfaith engagement is good and end up having a nationalistic pride in the US, which is not the role of interfaith engagement. The role is to promote justice in communities, not support the government of the nation. This nationalism then extends to the idea that countries that do not promote pluralism are barbaric, versus the US, which is civilized.¹¹ This means that this engagement is being used as a political system to promote US nationalism. It does not help that one of the most prominent interfaith organizations is on the US government payroll.¹² The role of interfaith engagement in the US should not be to further a nationalistic ideology that extends into foreign policy; this role is neither the stated purpose of the organizations nor is it ethical.

Additionally, scholars argue that interfaith engagement creates an isolating binary against extremism.¹³ Instead of the binary being one religion against another or a “bad” religion against a “good” religion, as it has traditionally been, the separation becomes between “good” people of one religion and “bad” people of the same religion, which still antagonizes and

¹⁰ Hulsether, “Can Interfaith Dialogue Cure Religious Violence?”; Hulsether, “Out of Incorporation, Pluralism.”

¹¹ Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 177.

¹² Brazil, “What Is Interfaith Dialogue For?”

¹³ Hulsether, “Can Interfaith Dialogue Cure Religious Violence?”

dehumanizes a group of people. Separation and dehumanization do not create justice or build up the community. Those things are often exactly what interfaith and justice groups fight against. Also, because they advocate for the ideas of pluralism and tolerance, they created another binary of groups that tolerate and the inferior groups that must be tolerated.¹⁴ Both of these binaries isolate a certain group of people and apply interfaith engagement in a way that distorts the actual role of interfaith engagement.

Many interfaith groups also fail to work towards their purpose of justice when they set out to only focus on similarities or try to converge all of their differences to come up with something on which everyone can agree. Many organizations list understanding as an aim of their interfaith engagement, yet it is important to remember that understanding and agreeing are not the same. Areas of conflict should be discussed maturely, so that people of different faiths can peacefully acknowledge and understand the context and basis for different beliefs, even if they strongly disagree with the belief. This understanding must come from all communities involved; the responsibility does not fall on the majority to tolerate the other. Both groups must seek to see the other with equal importance in US society.¹⁵ While understanding is a positive outcome of interfaith engagement it alone does not fulfill the role that the organizations state as their purpose.

Similarly, one of the positive outcomes of interfaith engagement is that it facilitates the individuals becoming more aware of their own individual identity and beliefs.¹⁶ Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, argues that within interfaith dialogues individuals can

¹⁴ Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 178.

¹⁵ Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 184.

¹⁶ Eck, *A New Religious America*.

discover the diversity and multiplicity within their own identity.¹⁷ For example, Patel had to reconcile what it meant for him to be both Muslim and American. In interfaith conversations, he could discover what he had in common with other Americans because of that shared identity, but that there were also differences that came because of difference in religion, or gender or ability. While identities do not usually change as a result of these conversations, they are important because people grow personally and interpersonally.¹⁸ They learn more about their own identity as well as the identities of others. Though understanding identity is important and positive, organizations cannot aim to have this as the ultimate end in their structure because they do not fulfill the stated role of interfaith engagement. These discoveries are often the means to prepare people to be able to work together or positive side effect of dialogue, but the direction must be focused on the justice work and not individual awareness if the organization is going to be an effective tool for social transformation.

Current Foci of Interfaith Engagement:

In my research, I looked into over ten different interfaith organizations within the United States. These organizations covered a span of different types of organizations from college campus initiative to dialogue facilitators to a worker's rights movement. I looked at both their projects and mission statements in order to determine the general contemporary structure and goals of interfaith engagement in the US. These goals are the stated ways through which organizations try to fulfill their ultimate vision and purpose of social justice transformation.

¹⁷ Patel, "Why Interfaith Efforts Matter More Than Ever."

¹⁸ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*.

Education:

One of the main goals that different organizations express is understanding and education.¹⁹ The two council style organizations that I researched, meaning there was an overarching organization in charge of coordinating multiple programs with different aims, as well as most of the college campus initiatives put a large emphasis on education. Education occurs at both macro and micro levels. For macro-level education, pamphlets are created or speakers give a presentation educating about certain beliefs. For micro-level education, dialogue groups are created so that people can come in contact with and learn to understand the day-to-day nuances of people in another faith group. Part of this education is necessary simply because people do not know the point of view or differences of another religious tradition. Without nuanced awareness, people can easily perpetuate stereotypes of other religions, which contributes to the issues that social justice seeks to effect.

Even more importantly, though, the reason that dialogue is important is because it generates ideas for the ways in which interfaith communities might act.²⁰ When members of one faith tradition understand and acknowledge some of the similar ideologies between their own faith and another faith tradition, they see ways in which the communities can work together to fight for the same cause. In order to be more effective on one front, the different religious traditions can forgo the differences that they do have, though not ignore them, and unite on areas that they do agree. When the members of faith congregations are ignorant about the beliefs and values of other groups, they cannot find common causes on which they can effectively unite. Thus, through intentional dialogue and education about issues concerning the different groups,

¹⁹ “The President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge”; Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom.”

²⁰ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*.

the congregations involved can find common ground on which they can unite and fight for the common good.

Relationships:

The relationships that are formed through these interfaith engagements are also essential to fulfilling the greater purpose of these interactions. An important caveat is that it is not interfaith relationships that are essential to fulfilling the purpose of interfaith engagement, but the relationships formed through intentional interfaith dialogue and action in which people discuss experiences relating to their faith identity. This qualification is crucial because a person can have a relationship with a person of another faith and never know or talk about those aspects of identity. For example, when co-workers spend a lot of time together and discuss only the work that they have, they do not discuss their perspectives on faith. While they may have different faith identities, without having those intentional discussions, they cannot learn about the other person's faith experience. Intentional interfaith relationships are important to the process of interfaith engagement because they provide nuanced experience. There is great diversity even within one religious tradition, and practice differs sometimes from doctrine, and therefore pamphlets and online websites are insufficient.²¹ The relationships can be individual accounts of what religion means, so that a person might get a practical education of what a certain faith tradition might look like. Like previously mentioned, the conversations generated through these relationships of personal experiences might also shed light on a social issue for which the communities can unite. When one person associates an issue with another person, with whom they have a relationship, they are more likely to be committed to a service opportunity because they can understand the impact that the change will have on that person.

²¹ "The Interfaith Councils - American Islamic Congress - American Islamic Congress."

Additionally, relationships formed help effective social action due to the connections and alliances built.²² Like previously discussed, social change is more effective when multiple religious groups unite for one cause. In order to unite these different groups, there have to be points of contact and connection. When a member from one congregation has a previously established relationship with a member from another congregation, getting that second person to understand why a cause is important or relevant becomes easier because life experiences and perspectives have already been shared. That person can then recruit members from their own congregation to help out, who might not have otherwise known about the effort. Social change initiatives can reach a larger audience and incorporate more people when an individual has a diverse network. Therefore, intentional relationships are necessary in interfaith organizations to unite different congregations for the common good.

Action:

The last main aspect of interfaith engagement is action. This means uniting the different congregations to work together in order to make a difference in the community. Without action, the vision of interfaith organizations cannot be fully realized. Both education and relationships are means to facilitate effective action, which will hopefully enact justice. Presently, most initiatives, especially those on college campuses, only involve themselves in service. These service projects involve fixing up buildings, park clean ups, and other community service activities that involve mainly manual labor and no risk. Other organizations go a step further: they create action initiatives to try to change the social system. I argue that organizations need to move past service and towards action in order to fulfill their stated purpose of justice and working towards common good.

²² McCartin, "Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement."

Action is required for interfaith engagement because it creates momentum. When interfaith interactions have no larger direction beyond facilitating personal understanding of another faith group, there is minimal impact and people lose interest and fade away.²³ If a person is not naturally interested in learning about other faiths and they see no greater purpose in the challenge of interfaith engagement, there is little desire for them to continue attending dialogue or continue learning.²⁴ They might even believe that they have learned all there is to know about a certain religion. In these instances, they will stop being a part of the interfaith communities and there will be less people available to affect the community for the common good. When the group works together towards a larger project, including the dialogue process to find an issue to tackle, people stay invested. Otherwise, people involved tend to fade away from interfaith interactions.²⁵ Thus action is required for people to esteem and continue contributing to these organizations.

More importantly, though, action is inherently integral to the mission of interfaith engagement. As previously argued, interfaith engagements have the potential to shape society and the organizations recognize that their mission in these interactions is to promote the common good and social justice. If people just learn about each other and discuss differences, then that greater purpose is never realized and social transformation is never achieved.²⁶ It seems obvious, but because most of the organizations in my research stated that their vision was to create some sort of active movement within the society, action towards social justice is required for the purpose of interfaith engagement. When these are the aims explicitly expressed by the organizations, there must be some sort of action in the community for fulfillment.

²³ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*.

²⁶ Ibid.

Needed Shift:

While I argue, based on my research, that education and action, through meaningful relationships, are needed in order to fulfill the main purpose of interfaith engagement, interfaith organizations are failing in multiple ways because they have yet to fully realize the importance of action. First, while they are both important, interfaith dialogue and education cannot be seen as the end goal of the interaction. Education is important in allowing people to encounter, learn about, and understand differences in their own and other religions, but education should be seen as the means by which people develop the capacity to serve and act with others.²⁷ In the US right now, organizations, college campuses especially, focus too much on dialogue. The Interfaith Youth Core focuses on “appreciative knowledge” and building awareness. In the same way, interfaith relationships cannot be an end. They should be used to enhance the ability of these organizations to act for social justice. But many organizations, such as the National Council of Churches focuses on building interfaith relationships without vision for the greater purpose that they claim is their goal.²⁸ Dialogue and relationships are important, but they are just starting blocks. Interfaith organizations in the US need to take the next step, past education, towards action.

Second, of the organizations that do reach past education and relationships as ends, many are stuck in service projects. As explained before, I define a service project as an effort in the community that involves mainly simple human labor and requires little risk. While these projects definitely help serve needs in the community, they are not sufficient. The purpose of interfaith engagement is to mobilize faith groups to take a stand together and make a change, via their

²⁷ Patel, “What Is Interfaith Cooperation For?”; “The President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge”; Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom.”

²⁸ “About Interreligious Relations and Collaboration.”

united presence, in the community. Service projects that require no serious dialogue, but are something any human might do, cannot promote this goal. Action, however, addresses the systemic issues in the community that inhibit justice. Action addresses issues closer to the roots so that the symptoms that arrive from these systemic issues will no longer be a problem. This action would include, but is not limited to, marching, protesting, or writing letters to congress. Organizations that seriously desire to fulfill the purpose of interfaith engagement must take a step past service projects and move towards action that mobilizes the different faith groups for the common good or else the vision of interfaith interaction will never be fully realized.

I specifically call on college campuses to lead the way in implementing these changes. After the White House initiative, which specifically called for institutes of higher education to engage in interfaith work, most of the organizations and programs that I could find were based out of a college or university. They are training the future leaders of the movement. But, most of the campus initiatives only engage in service projects; they do not yet engage in action. This means that the future leaders of the nation will only be trained in how to enact service projects and will therefore not be equipped to engage in effective interfaith work. College campuses especially should aim to challenge or support the societal structure. With the energy and passion of most college students, I believe that these movements would be powerful and successful. This would set an example for other interfaith organizations, serve as instruction for future leaders, and fulfill the greater purpose of interfaith engagement. Most communities and campuses focus primarily on either education or service. Interfaith engagement needs to be headed by organizations that have strong programs for education and action, not just service, and the ability to combine them effectively.

Conclusion:

Even though there are imperfections in the pluralistic nature of the United States, the state of reality is that the nation is pluralistic. Within the last 50 years, people have started to welcome other cultures and invite others to share in their own culture more and more. Within this society there exist many interfaith organizations, most of which have stated that justice and working towards the common good is their vision. Because of the unique role that religion plays in the pluralistic United States, interfaith communities are positioned to create legitimacy for social transformation movements, which multiplies influence when different faith communities stand united. Therefore, in this paper, I argued that interfaith engagement the role of interfaith engagement in the US is to be an effective tool to bring people of faith together to act for social justice and the common good.

I also showed that, in order to fully realize their vision and purpose, interfaith organizations must strive towards action, instead of service, while continuing the projects of education and relationship building. The education must serve to enlighten people on the experiences and traditions of the other as well as expose the areas in the community in which the congregations might stand in unity. The action is then needed to provide momentum and resolution to the areas previously identified, thus creating social transformation. In the United States, organizations need to start focusing more on the action aspect of interfaith engagement, specifically focusing on systematic social change instead of individual service projects that have no greater impact on the community.

These efforts are incredibly important because coming to understand and work with people across religious difference for justice can set the stage, figuratively speaking, for people to understand and accept difference along other lines of difference. People can use the same

methods of dialogue and engagement to reach the same understanding within other social issues, such as race, gender, sexuality, and ability.²⁹ Instead of just fighting for religious freedom or issues that come to the light in conversations across religious difference, the people who engage in these conversations, will be equipped to fight for issues along other lines of difference, even if the person does not completely agree with the perspectives of the other group. Thus, these interactions will affect more than just religious communities. Interfaith engagements are proto examples of the cooperation that is necessary to function in the incredible diverse and pluralistic nation of the United States.

²⁹ Gray, "Keeping the Faiths."

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