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## Interfaith Youth Core: Theology and Religious Commitment in One of America's Most Prominent Youth Interfaith Organizations

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**Interfaith Youth Core:  
Theology and Religious Commitment in One of America's Most Prominent  
Youth Interfaith Organizations**

AN ALL COLLEGE THESIS

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for Distinction

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by

*Megan Weiss*

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**Project title:** Interfaith Youth Core: Theology and Religious Commitment in One of America's Most Prominent Youth Interfaith Organizations

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## Introduction

The term “interfaith” is not well-defined. There have been numerous definitions of what constitutes interfaith since the concept originated. In the broadest sense, interfaith refers to people from diverse religious traditions being involved in common endeavors.<sup>1</sup> This definition is almost too broad though, a definition I consider more appropriate for “multi-faith,” especially if it is being used to describe interfaith events. It consequently implies that many of our daily interactions (if we live in a diverse area) are interfaith. Particularly in America we are surrounded by people from different religions. Religious diversity is a reality of our life here, whether we are aware of it or not. The Association of Interfaith Ministers recognizes three more nuanced definitions of interfaith:<sup>2</sup>

1. Dialogue and cooperation between or among leaders or members of different religions for the purpose of understanding each other and working together on projects
2. The union of two or more faiths, beliefs, or practices in the context of a specific situation such as the marriage of two people from different faiths and the raising of their children
3. The search for the mythic, poetic basis of all religions and the need to get in touch with that basis through whatever means appropriate for an individual; the search to create new religious forms that speak to an individual’s particular lifestyle or personal orientation

These definitions emphasize that interfaith engagement involves a degree of intentionality. It involves each person involved to make a conscious decision to extend their own beliefs and convictions to another. Religious conviction and dialogue that facilitates understanding and growth in a person’s own faith are the crux of authentic interfaith work. They are what distinguish interfaith *encounters* from interfaith *engagement*. Interfaith occurs *between* people from different religions. It is the interaction and engagement of people from different

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> Joel Beversluis (editor), *Sourcebook of the World's Religions: An Interfaith Guide to Religion and Spirituality* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), 159.

religions which includes discussion of religious principles and theology and helps cultivate mutual understanding and personal faith commitment. In contrast, multi-faith *includes* people from different religions. It is the existence of religious diversity and does not require engaging in conversation about religious principles or theology.

Today, interfaith work is often associated with religiously diverse groups of people working together on a common cause rather than intentional discussion of religious differences and similarities. While people in these situations are engaging in service work together, without theological dialogue, they are not participating in authentic interfaith engagement. While finding common ground is important, focusing on it risks impoverishing interfaith by diminishing the conversations about religious and theological differences that make interfaith so thought-provoking and risks making interfaith a substitute for individual faith. Without individual commitment and a willingness to bring one's full self to the conversation, interfaith is not sustainable. Thus engaging theology and religious tradition, and facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation for both one's own and other people's faiths, along with finding common ground, is necessary in interfaith work.

There are many interfaith organizations throughout the world and each operates on a slightly different definition of interfaith. Some definitions do not get at what I consider to be authentic interfaith engagement because they lack a balance between theological discussion, personal faith development, and discussion about common ground and shared values. In cases where theology and personal faith development are given less emphasis, the engagement that occurs is multi-faith rather than interfaith. I will examine the extent to which this balance is preserved in the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), one of the most prominent youth interfaith

organizations in America, and determine whether it is more aptly described as an interfaith or multi-faith organization.

Two scholars who truly embody what constitutes interfaith engagement are Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Diana Eck. Heschel was a rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century. He was also very involved in interfaith dialogue, particularly between Christians and Jews. He walked alongside Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist preacher, in the Civil Rights Movement, and was an active consultant in the drafting of *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church's document on its relationship with non-Christian religions.

Heschel's essay "No Religion is an Island" is evidence of how he was way ahead of his time in terms of interfaith. Before "interfaith" was conceived as a distinct movement, Heschel recognized that authentic interfaith engagement was necessary to establish peace among religions. He says: "We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism. . . . Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation? Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or should we pray for each other's health and help one another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?"<sup>3</sup>

Heschel also keenly recognized that interfaith must emerge from the depth of one's own beliefs; that unless it was carried out properly, interfaith could unintentionally undermine faith:

It is only out of the depth of involvement in the unending drama that began with Abraham that we can help one another toward an understanding of our situation. Interfaith must come out of the depth, not out of a void absence of faith. . . . Moreover, at a time of paucity of faith, interfaith may become a substitute for faith, suppressing authenticity for the sake of compromise. In a world of conformity, religions can easily be leveled down to the lowest common denominator. . . . Both communication and separation are necessary. We must preserve our individuality as well as foster care for one another, reverence, understanding, cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *No Religion is an Island* (Mayryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Heschel, *No Religion is an Island*, 11.

While we can accomplish incredible things when we come together as people of faith, the heart of interfaith is the theology, traditions, and beliefs each of us as an individual hold. Out of everything Heschel says, I think there is one phrase in particular captures the inherent nature of authentic interfaith: *“The first and most important prerequisite of interfaith is faith.”*<sup>5</sup> There can be no interfaith if there is not first faith. This is why I believe that for an interaction among people from different religions to be interfaith, it must intentionally include acknowledgement and engagement with the religious beliefs and traditions of those involved. It is also why I believe authentic interfaith engagement must sustain and foster a person’s commitment to their own religion as well as respect for other religions.

Also related to interfaith is religious pluralism. It is one of the primary goals of interfaith engagement. In its most basic sense, religious pluralism is an attitude of respect and appreciation for religious traditions that differ from one’s own. Similar to interfaith, religious pluralism also has multiple definitions including religious diversity, toleration for different religious beliefs, accepting all truth claims as equally valid; a state of coexistence among religions.<sup>6</sup> While there is some truth to each of these definitions, they miss essential parts of the nature of religious pluralism. Religious diversity is a fact while religious pluralism requires constructive interaction among religious diversity. Toleration of different religious beliefs is not true pluralism because tolerance does not require one to respect or get to know the religious other. It simply requires them to accept their presence. Accepting all other truth claims as equally valid is also a threat to true pluralism because it can easily lead people to conclude that there is no point in identifying with any religion as they are qualitatively equal and say essentially the same thing. A state of coexistence among religions is a goal rather than a definition of religious pluralism. The question

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10. Italics added.

<sup>6</sup> “Religious Exclusivism, Pluralism, and Inclusivism: The Diverse Meanings of the Term ‘Religious Pluralism,’” Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, accessed April 2016, [http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel\\_plur1.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_plur1.htm)



is, “What does coexistence look like?” and “What definition of religious pluralism most effectively facilitates coexistence?” A necessary part of the answer to both of these questions is authentic interfaith engagement, because without it we cannot simultaneously come to a genuine understanding of others and retain our own individuality.

The definition of religious pluralism that most successfully advances authentic interfaith engagement is championed by Diana Eck. Eck is a Christian professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies, as well as the director of the Pluralism Project, at Harvard University. She defines pluralism as not diversity alone, but energetic engagement with diversity; not tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference; not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. Religious pluralism is based on dialogue, a process that reveals both similarities and differences. In essence it is a “commitment to being at the table -- with one’s commitments.”<sup>7</sup> Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from plurality “through critical and self-critical encounter with one another, acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences.”<sup>8</sup>

Heschel’s and Eck’s views of interfaith complement each other. They both argue that faith, commitment to one’s own beliefs, and dialogue are essential components of interfaith, that in order for the religions of the world—and the rich gifts each’s’ traditions provide—to be sustained in the reality of a multi-faith world, interfaith must inspire its participants to delve deeper into their own traditions. They also agree that one must enter into interfaith with a firm sense of their own identity because it enables us to address our similarities and differences without feeling threatened. As a monk I know, Father Willaim Skuldarick OSB, once said, “You

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<sup>7</sup> Diana Eck, “What is Pluralism?” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, accessed April 2016, [http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what\\_is\\_pluralism](http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism)

<sup>8</sup> Diana Eck, “From Diversity to Pluralism,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, accessed April 2016, <http://pluralism.org/encounter/todays-challenges/from-diversity-to-pluralism/>

don't fall in love with your own religion. You fall in love with another religion. But this doesn't take away from your love of your own religion. It is like the love you have for your mom. You don't fall in love with your mom; you fall in love with someone else. But this doesn't question the love you have for your mom." In an interfaith encounter, religious commitment is like a mother's milk. It sustains you, connecting you to who you are while also giving you the strength to venture and engage with the unknown.

When discussing interfaith, it is important to understand what "faith" is. Heschel says many rich things about faith, among them being that, "Faith is sensitiveness to what transcends nature, knowledge and will, awareness of the ultimate, alertness to the holy dimension of all reality.... It is begotten in passionate love for the significance of all reality, in devotion to the ultimate meaning which is only God."<sup>9</sup> Faith is being present to what is outside our realm of understanding and it enables us to encounter the transcendent. It is a commitment to that which we hold true in our hearts, but which cannot be proven through empirical methods. Faith animates religion, and for this reason having faith is necessary for interfaith engagement to happen.

In this context, in one of his major essays on interfaith relations, Heschel identifies four dimensions of religion:<sup>10</sup>

1. *Teaching*: Creed
2. *Faith*: The inwardness, direction of a person's heart, and intimacy of religion
3. *Law*: The sacred act to be carried out in the sanctuary, home, and society, and a dimension of the deed
4. *Context*: Where creed, faith, and ritual come to pass (community, covenant, history, tradition, dimension of transcendence)

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<sup>9</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Holy Dimension" *The Journal of Religion* 23 (2) (1943): 117–124.

<sup>10</sup> Heschel, *No Religion Is an Island*, 8.

Based on Heschel's understanding of faith and the four dimensions of religion he mentions, among the dimensions of faith that could be cited, I would like to emphasize four:

1. *Encounter*: First and foremost, faith involves an encounter with, and response to, something beyond yourself; with a community, with nature, or with the transcendent. It is, in Heschel's framework, "sensitivity, engagement, and attachment."<sup>11</sup> There is no faith without encounter, because faith implies relationship. We cannot have faith in something without having at the very least a vague relationship to it.
  
2. *Doctrine*: Faith is not just doctrine, but doctrine is an important part; it defines your beliefs. As John C. Merkle posits in his discussion of Heschel's position on doctrine, "If properly employed . . . dogmas [doctrine] can preserve, communicate, and even illumine the insights of faith."<sup>12</sup> Understanding doctrine and how it relates to and provides a foundation for your faith is more important than simply believing it. All faiths, even secular faiths, have doctrines. For example, secular humanists believe humanity emerged as a result of a continuous process, the universe is self-existing, and that there is no distinction between the sacred and secular.<sup>13</sup> Muslim doctrine posits that the Qur'an is the literal word of God and that Muhammad is the final prophet. Catholic doctrine declares that God is a trinity and that Jesus is the Son of God who came down from heaven, was crucified, died, and rose on the third day to save us from our sins. Doctrine is essential to religion—for example, the doctrine of the Eucharist to Catholicism, the doctrine of Muhammad being God's prophet and the Qur'an God's word to Islam, and the Four Noble Truths to Buddhism. There is no faith without some sort of doctrine.

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<sup>11</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 154.

<sup>12</sup> John C. Merkle, *Approaching God: The Way of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> "Humanist Manifesto I," American Humanist Association, last modified 2016, 88,

[http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/humanist\\_manifesto\\_i](http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/humanist_manifesto_i)

3. *Practice*: Faith involves participating in certain acts and avoiding others. If you say you are Catholic, but never pray or go to Mass, are you really Catholic? Analogously, if you say you are devoted to your country, but never participate in national service, are you really devoted to it? If you have faith in human goodness and are disrespectful and hostile towards others, do you really have faith in human goodness? Practice is also how we connect to our religion's tradition. Regarding Judaism Heschel avows that "Judaism is a religion of history" and "genuine history is enshrined in our rituals."<sup>14</sup> When we practice the traditional aspects of our faith, we connect to its history and the community that came before us and is the reason we can practice today.
4. *Conviction*: Conviction has to do with how strongly connected and devoted a person is to their religion and its practices. Faith is not static and thus conviction can fluctuate. Some days we may feel really strong in our convictions (like when we come back from a religious retreat); other days we may be unsure. This being said, faith does not exist without conviction. Even if you are feeling lost and your conviction is weak, to be a member of a specific religion requires some level of conviction in its core beliefs. For this reason, Heschel comments that it is essential that we preserve our individuality in interfaith dialogue and help one another "search in the wilderness for wellsprings of devotion."<sup>15</sup> "It is only out of the depth of involvement in the unending drama that began with Abraham that we can help one another toward an understanding of our situation. Interfaith must come out of depth, not out of a void absence of faith."<sup>16</sup> Our commitment

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<sup>14</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 200.

<sup>15</sup> Heschel, *No Religion is an Island*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

and conviction, even when wavering, are what makes us receptive to encounters with God through doctrine, practice, and interactions with one another, regardless of whether or not we belong to the same religion.

Faith requires all these to be present in some way. They do not have to be perfect and cannot be as faith is a process, but they all need to be present because faith cannot be sustained without them. Thus when I am discussing how interfaith should encourage personal faith development, I am referring to development in these areas.

In light of these definitions and my assertion of what constitutes authentic interfaith engagement, I turn to the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC). IFYC is one of the most well-known interfaith organizations in the U.S. It has thousands of participants and is affiliated with hundreds of colleges, universities, and organizations across America. The founder, Eboo Patel, views interfaith somewhat differently than Heschel and Eck. Patel defines interfaith as how people's relationships with their religious/nonreligious traditions impact their interactions with those who are different and how these interactions impact the way they relate to their traditions.<sup>17</sup> To this end, he says interfaith can become five things: a bunker of isolation, a barrier of division, a bludgeon of domination, the blasé of simply losing identity altogether, or a bridge of cooperation.<sup>18</sup> The first four of these are problematic because they undermine interfaith relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Patel's primary view of interfaith work is as a bridge of cooperation. This is, in fact, his goal and the goal of IFYC; to build bridges between people of different religious and non-

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<sup>17</sup> "Building Religious Pluralism," Council on Foreign Relations, Religion and Foreign Policy Conference Call, June 16, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/religion/building-religious-pluralism/p36652>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Those who build a bunker isolate themselves; those who build a barrier reject all other ways of being; the bludgeon uses religion as justification for violence against those who do not share the same beliefs; blasé results in no religion at all and you can't have an interfaith relationship without faith being involved.

religious identities. Interfaith work does not stop at the bridge though. A bridge is always built for a purpose. In Patel's case, the bridge of cooperation Patel seeks to build is for the purpose of furthering the common good. In other words, interfaith work or cooperation for Patel is primarily a means for building social capital. In this way, while Patel acknowledges faith is an important part of interfaith, interfaith for him is more so a civic rather than religious activity; it is about action rather than theological discussion.

Similarly, Patel's definition of religious pluralism differs somewhat from Eck's, although he does cite her as the source of his definition. The official definition IFYC gives on its website has three parts: respect for religious and non-religious identities, mutually inspiring relationships between people from different backgrounds, and common action for the common good.<sup>20</sup> Technically speaking, this is a valid definition of religious pluralism. The question is whether, with a civic rather than religious focus, the programs and practices that stem from this definition foster the religious commitment and personal faith development that I, as well as Heschel and Eck, believe are necessary in interfaith work.

IFYC's impact is undeniable. It engages thousands of young adults in interfaith activities and service work each year. It shows them how religion can be used to create positive rather than negative social change, and it speaks to their desire to act. Better Together programs on various college campuses across America have made a noteworthy impact in terms of social justice, collecting food for food shelves, putting together toiletry kits, and raising money to provide clean water to developing countries.<sup>21</sup> The question is whether IFYC's method is fostering authentic interfaith engagement; whether it is promoting a sustainable model of interfaith or whether, as Heschel warned, it is causing interfaith to be a substitute for faith. Should it be considered an

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<sup>20</sup> "The Framework," IFYC, accessed April, 2016, <https://www.ifyc.org/about>

<sup>21</sup> "Best Overall Campaign," IFYC, accessed April, 2016, <https://www.ifyc.org/content/best-overall-campaign>

interfaith organization or multi-faith service organization; an organization that engages people in critical reflection about both their own and other religions or an organization that engages people from different religions in common activities? To this end, the purpose of this thesis is twofold: First I will look at the development of IFYC, what it is doing today, and how its current orientation relates to interfaith and Heschel's and Eck's definitions of this. Secondly, I will explore the implications of IFYC's approach to interfaith, determine whether it should be considered an interfaith or a multi-faith organization, and give suggestions for improvement.

## Part 1: Eboo Patel and the Origins of IFYC

### Brief Introduction to Patel

Eboo Patel is a Shia Muslim by tradition. Growing up, while his parents were insistent that he and his brother observe certain Islamic practices, such as not eating pork, they seldom attended religious services, in part because, as immigrants trying to establish a life for themselves, they did not always have the time to. Service, though, was always emphasized.

One of the most influential people in Patel's life in regard to the relationship between religion and service was his grandmother. His grandmother was very committed to her Islamic faith. The image of her Patel remembers most clearly is her sitting and, tasbeeh in hand, reciting "Allah" repeatedly. Sometimes she would cry when during prayer, "the name of the Prophet causing an overflow of love from deep in her heart."<sup>22</sup> Like many teenagers, Patel did not have much interest in religion. Thus, because his grandmother would always ask him if he was saying his prayers and insisting he marry a nice Muslim girl, Patel avoided her whenever she came to visit. In Patel's view Islam was something the older generations were holding on to and just another thing that set him apart from his classmates. This all changed when he went to visit her in India. One morning he woke up to find a woman he didn't know in her apartment. Upon questioning his grandmother, Patel learned that she didn't know the woman, but had taken her in after the leader from the prayer house had brought her there. They told his grandmother the woman was being abused at home by her father and uncle. Concerned for his grandmother's safety, Patel told her she shouldn't be taking strangers into her home –what if the woman's father and uncle came looking for her, who would protect her? In response she said "I have been doing this for forty-five years. That's more than twice as long as you've been on earth. This may be the

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<sup>22</sup> Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 97.



fiftieth, sixtieth, hundredth person who has come here and been safe.” She proceeded to go to an old shoe box. Inside were pictures of all the people she had helped.

Patel was taken aback by this aspect of his grandmother’s life that he had never known, but what struck him the most was her response to his question as to why she did this: “I am a Muslim. This is what Muslims do.”<sup>23</sup> Patel says his life began at that moment:

That moment was a window and a path. A window, first of all, into what religion could be in the world. . . . I started to see that religion could be a bridge of cooperation, inspiration for service. It began my path of looking at Judaism, at Buddhism, at Hinduism, at the Sikh faith, at the Bahia faith, even at secular humanism and asking the question, “How do we build a movement where you have a critical mass of interfaith bridge builders?”<sup>24</sup>

His grandmother showed him religion was more than ritual; it had the profound power to inspire altruistic acts and heal what he saw as a broken world.

### *Catholic Worker Movement*

Patel’s involvement in the Catholic Worker Movement during and after his years in college further instilled this perspective of religion. The Catholic Worker Movement was founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933.<sup>25</sup> Catholic Worker houses are places of radical hospitality primarily located in impoverished parts of American cities, although some exist in rural areas as well, where food, clothing, shelter, and community are offered free of charge. They are staffed by volunteers who in some cases, especially when the houses were first founded, live in community together.

While undoubtedly an expression of social justice, the Catholic Worker Movement is based on Day’s deep commitment to her Catholic faith. Day was an orthodox Catholic who believed Christ left himself both in the Eucharist and those in need. In this way, for Day,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>24</sup> “Eboo Patel at TEDxWomen 2012,” Tedx Talks, YouTube Video, 14:28. Posted [December, 2012], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlaEOl6tLF8>

<sup>25</sup> Jim Forest, “The Catholic Worker Movement,” The Catholic Worker Movement, accessed April, 2016, <http://www.catholicworker.org/forest-history.html>

traditional practice went hand in hand with service. Her religious practices fueled her service work. As Jim Forest, who worked alongside Day in the Catholic Worker House in New York City reflects, “First of all, Dorothy Day taught me that justice begins on our knees. I have never known anyone, not even in monasteries, who was more of a praying person than Dorothy Day. When I think of her, I think of her first of all on her knees praying before the Blessed Sacrament. I think of those long lists of names she kept of people, living and dead, to pray for. I think of her at Mass, I think of her praying the rosary, I think of her going off for Confession each Saturday evening.”<sup>26</sup> Day embodied the phrase “faith without works is dead” while emphasizing that religious practice is crucial in religiously based service.

The Catholic Worker Movement’s dual commitment to service and faith and how each commitment inspired the other profoundly impacted Patel. While around him stories abounded about religious violence, the Catholic Worker House exemplified how commitment to the transcendent could generate a radical social vision with love at the center. His experience there indicated to him the power of religion to create communities committed to addressing the social problems of the world. The Catholic Worker Movement also gave Patel a tangible way to emulate the spirit of service embodied by his grandmother. In it he found a new way to enact social change through the means of religion.

It is clear why service and religion are essentially inseparable for Patel. He grew up surrounded by people who lived out their religion’s command to serve. It is interesting to note that the religious commitment exhibited by his grandmother and the people he encountered at the Catholic Worker house had less of an impact on him in a theological sense. Patel prays and fasts during Ramadan, but does not regularly attend religious services or engage with the more theological aspects of Islam. So while the religious practices of faith are still important to Patel,

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.uscatholic.org/culture/social-justice/2009/02/what-i-learned-about-justice-dorothy-day>

they do not take top priority. For him, religious tradition is more about the actions and service it can inspire people to do, rather than the actual theology and rituals themselves. This same sentiment is present in IFYC. It is one reason I think IFYC falls short of the authentic religious engagement prescribed by Eck and Heschel.

### **Origin of IFYC**

The three primary sources of inspiration for IFYC articulated by Patel are Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement, the youth service movement, and the interfaith movement.<sup>27</sup> As explained in the previous section, Patel was inspired by how the Catholic workers' faith inspired them to do service. Additionally, when Patel was in college, the youth service movement was really starting to take hold. His friends were always volunteering and many of them took a year off after college to volunteer. When Patel looked at the non-profit and service organizations that his friends took part in, he noticed something that struck a chord with him. While some combined faith and diversity and some combined service and diversity, there was no organization that combined faith, service, and diversity.<sup>28</sup> While the interfaith movement had the potential to do this, it was comprised, in Patel's view, of a bunch of old people who talked a lot, but never accomplished any action.<sup>29</sup> Patel was determined to actualize this potential.

The idea for IFYC came to Patel during his time at the United Religions Initiative's (URI) Global Summit (June 1998), which brought together people involved in interfaith from around the world. The URI was founded in 1993 by the Episcopal Bishop William Swing after he was invited by the United Nations to host a large interfaith project to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the UN's charter. Swing asked himself, "If the nations are working

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<sup>27</sup> "Eboo Patel in his own words," JC Leadership, YouTube video, 7:45. Posted [March, 2009], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5azbXDWpJMg&index=42&list=PL1C1A33A59267F807>

<sup>28</sup> Patel, *Acts of Faith*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

together for peace through the UN, where are the world's religions?"<sup>30</sup> The URI is an organization whose mission is to bring interfaith to the grassroots level by connecting local interfaith groups and coordinating their activities.

Patel and the other attendees who were under thirty skipped many of the formal sessions to hang with each other. Like Patel, their religious identities had developed amidst religious diversity and were rooted in service. The space these gatherings created was akin to the community Patel had seen in the Catholic Worker houses he had worked in and Stone Soup, except this time the community was interfaith.

Not wanting this space to dissipate after the conference ended, Patel began to brainstorm ways to create similar spaces. Stemming from his time at Catholic Worker houses and Stone Soup, an intentional living community focused on social justice that Patel created with friends from college,<sup>31</sup> the idea he came up with was to create a program where people from diverse religions lived together in a residential community for one year and participated in service projects. It would follow in the footsteps of faith-based volunteer organizations like the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and Catholic Worker house and service organizations like City Year and Teach for America, but would be unique in that it would connect faith, service, and diversity. All the other organizations Patel had come across only connected two out of the three. This new community would also address two things that Patel thought were missing from interfaith work: young people and concrete service. Thus the Interfaith Youth Corps was born.

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<sup>30</sup>"Charter," URI, accessed April 2016, [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org)

<sup>31</sup> Patel, *Acts of Faith*, 68.

## **Part 2: Developments within IFYC**

### ***Religious Beginning***

Personal religious development was initially something IFYC specifically set out to achieve. Patel eventually changed IFYC's name from the Interfaith Youth Corps to the Interfaith Youth *Core* because he wanted it to be the core of a new movement; a movement whose focus was strengthening religious identity and interfaith cooperation for the common good.<sup>32</sup> Social action and religious identity were equally important. IFYC's first mission statement reflects this sentiment as well: "Interfaith Youth Core seeks to build a movement that encourages people to strengthen their religious identity, foster inter-religious understanding and cooperate to serve the common good."<sup>33</sup> In addition, IFYC's staff was comprised of people who were highly involved in and committed to practicing their religion and religious congregations were where Patel initially went to garner support and get youth involved in IFYC. In this process, he would emphasize to the religious leaders how his methodology would strengthen youths' commitment to their own religious practices. He explained that the service work the youth engaged in would always be reflected back onto each one's religious tradition through debriefing and dialogue sessions, and how being able to live the values they had learned from their religious tradition would inspire them to learn more about them.

### ***CYC***

Another testament to IFYC's initial commitment to both service and religious identity formation is the Chicago Youth Council (CYC). CYC was one of IFYC's first programs. It was comprised of an equal number of high school and college students who were chosen on the basis of leadership and involvement in their religious community and their commitment to interfaith

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>33</sup> 2004 Annual Report <http://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/Annual%20Report%20FY2004.pdf>

work. One of the reasons for the equal split between high school and college students was to provide the high school students with a mentor and to enable them to interact with people who had transitioned into college with their faith intact.<sup>34</sup> It was important that individual religion didn't get lost in the shuffle because faith diversity is what made something interfaith.

CYC met once a week, alternating between interfaith dialogue and a service site each week. The dialogue included both conversation about shared values and individual aspects of religion. Sometimes the members were given "homework" such as researching a figure from their religious tradition that embodied a certain value. The service site remained the same throughout the year, and the time there always culminated in a final project.

For example, in 2004 CYC worked with Bantu children at the Interfaith Refugee and Immigration Ministries (IRIM). For their final project they chose to write a children's book about the Bantu children's experiences. The Bantu children had a rich oral storytelling tradition, but almost all of them were illiterate. In creating a children's book, CYC gave attention to and honored the Banu children's –and the Banu community as a whole –culture and experiences.<sup>35</sup> CYC not only intentionally engaged its participants in service and the shared values from their respective religion, but their religious *tradition* itself, thereby fostering their religious identity and commitment. As one high school participant, Ayala, remarked, "In terms of IFCY strengthening my religious identity, there was a clear link between my interfaith work and my choice to take a year off to further study Judaism in Israel. Israel gave me another context in which to discover being a pluralist Jew in relation to others."<sup>36</sup> Another CYC alumni stated, "I went back to my own faith to answer the questions I was being asked by people of other faiths,

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<sup>34</sup> Heckman, Bud, Rori Picker Neiss, Dirk Ficca, C. Welton Gaddy, Carol Harris-Shapiro, Abby Stamelman Hocky, April Kunze et al., *Interactive faith: The essential interreligious community-building handbook* (Woostock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2010), 129.

<sup>35</sup> For more details about CYC and the 2004 project see *InterActive Faith*, 128-138.

<sup>36</sup> Heckman et al., *InterActive Faith*, 137.

and this has deepened my faith.”<sup>37</sup> When IFYC began to branch out, it stopped CYC. I think this is a loss for IFYC, especially in terms of incorporating the personal and theological aspects of interfaith heralded by Heschel and Eck.

### ***Shift Away from Religious Identity***

IFYC’s first mission and vision statement, staff demographic, and first program all evidence a commitment to both interfaith cooperation through service and shared values and the development and maintenance of individual religious identity. As the organization has progressed though, its focus has moved increasingly towards service and shared values. The official pivot to being a movement organization that focuses primarily on interfaith cooperation rather than both interfaith cooperation and religious identity occurred in 2010.<sup>38</sup> IFYC decided it was not enough to have a small set of strong interfaith programs interfaith was something all Americans needed to pay attention to. To this end, they decided to put their effort into fueling people to work on a national level through work in their local communities. Additionally, they found that many of the people who attended their events identified as multi-faith or spiritual but not religious, rather than with a specific religious tradition, making focusing on specific aspects of religion more difficult. Due to these factors, IFYC decided to identify as a civic rather than religious organization; an organization focused on advancing the civic rather than personal religious benefits of interfaith cooperation. This shift has impacted their day to day training. It is much more nimble and less dogmatic, seeking to build relationships and train people how to teach others to build relationships instead of giving a spiritual experience. Although the actual pivot was in 2010, there is evidence that IFYC began to move away from religious identity within a couple years after being founded.

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<sup>37</sup> “Interfaith Youth Core Annual Report 2005,” IFYC, 2.

<https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/Annual%20Report%20FY2005.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Phone interview with IFYC staff member, September 1, 2015.

### *Annual Reports: Mission and Vision Statements Over the Years*

One way the shift towards a civic rather than religious focus can be seen is through changes in IFYC's vision and mission statements as presented in its Annual Reports throughout the years.<sup>39</sup> The first annual report, published in 2004, states that IFYC, "envisions a world in which religiously diverse young people interact peacefully and cooperate to serve local communities, thereby strengthening civil society and stabilizing the global community."<sup>40</sup> IFYC's mission statement in this report emphasizes their desire to cultivate individual religious development "to build a movement that encourages people to *strengthen their religious identity, foster inter-religious understanding* and cooperate to serve the common good."<sup>41</sup> This suggests that, at inception, IFYC operated on the conviction that service goes hand in hand with personal faith development, and, based on their activity at the time, this seems to indeed be the case. CYC was one of IFYC's main programs in the beginning and, as I have already noted, CYC did an excellent job of integrating personal faith development, service, and interfaith understanding in its programming. Also at this point, Patel was primarily presenting his vision for IFYC to religious congregations. He understood the concerns religious leaders had about undermining what they saw as an already shaky commitment among their youth and therefore a major part of his message included how participating in IFYC would strengthen participants' own religion in addition to fostering appreciation and respect for other religions. IFYC's 2004 vision statement is indicative of authentic interfaith engagement, corresponding to both Heshel's assertion that interfaith presupposes faith, and Eck's definition of religious pluralism as energetic engagement

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<sup>39</sup> See Appendix A for a table with IFYC's mission and vision statements from 2004 to 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Interfaith Youth Core, 2004 Annual Report, 4, <https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/Annual%20Report%20FY2004.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Interfaith Youth Core 2004 Annual Report, 4, italics added, <https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/Annual%20Report%20FY2004.pdf>



with diversity, active seeking of understanding across lines of difference, and an encounter of commitments, but it does not remain so in succeeding years.

The 2005 Annual report somewhat oddly does not explicitly mention either IFYC's vision or their mission, though it does mention that along with other elements, "our own strong personal commitments to strengthen our own faiths and share our values across faith traditions through community service—form a powerful core or trunk that an organization like ours needs in order to represent and nurture the field of interfaith youth work."<sup>42</sup> This suggests their vision and mission was likely similar to what it was in 2004.

In 2006, IFYC's mission took a more global and service-oriented turn. Their stated mission became "To build and spread a global movement of interfaith cooperation that inspires and promotes service work" and their vision "a world in which religiously diverse young people interact peacefully to create understanding and collaboration, thereby strengthening civil society and stabilizing global politics."<sup>43</sup> This stands in contrast with their 2004 mission and vision especially in terms of religion. There is no mention of strengthening religious identity or fostering inter-religious understanding. These words are instead replaced by "civil society" and "global politics," which may be explained by the fact that this is the time when IFYC began to self-identify as a movement organization. It is evident from the report's content that inter-religious understanding is still an important part of IFYC's vision and mission at this point, but I find it interesting that they took this out of their vision statement. Religious identity is mentioned only once, the focus on which begins to be somewhat replaced by a more action oriented approach.

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<sup>42</sup> Interfaith Youth Core, 2005 Annual Report, <https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/Annual%20Report%20FY2005.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Interfaith Youth Core, 2006 Annual Report, <https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/Annual%20Report%20FY2006.pdf>

Their 2007 mission elaborates on the 2006 version, including a focus on generating mass support for interfaith youth work and helping youth-focused institutions engage and cultivate leaders of the interfaith youth movement. IFYC began to see they needed to hone in on what exactly it was they set out to do. They committed to going a more civic and sociological route, treating religion as a source of social capital. Their vision statement remained essentially the same.

The 2008 mission introduces the concept of religious pluralism. It is a focus of the issue and the first of two times the concept appears in the annual report. As I mentioned in the introduction, IFYC's definition of religious pluralism is slightly different than the original definition coined by Diana Eck, the primary differences being a lack of emphasis on individual religious commitment and the omission of dialogue as a necessary component for pluralism. IFYC acknowledges the importance of recognizing religious identity, but this does not imply entering interfaith work committed to your own religion, and as in other instances, action takes precedence over dialogue.

IFYC's vision statement in the 2008 Annual Report reflects this same sentiment, specifying equal dignity and mutual loyalty as requirements for strengthening civil society and stabilizing global politics. There is greater focus on religious identity than in previous reports, but the definition of religious pluralism still lacks the focus on dialogue necessary for the strong individual religious commitment required in authentic religious pluralism.

No formal vision or mission is stated in the 2009 Annual Report, although the issue does mention making interfaith cooperation a social norm. There is also no vision statement in the 2010 Annual Report, but it does include a mission statement. It focuses on making interfaith cooperation a social norm and also includes the concept of building bridges, a concept that has

become a trademark of Patel: “Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) seeks to make interfaith cooperation a social norm. Too often in our world today, religion is seen as a barrier of division. IFYC believes faith can be a bridge of cooperation, strengthening our civil society and promoting the common good. We believe young interfaith leaders will build these bridges.”<sup>44</sup> Again, religion is seen sociologically rather than spiritually or theologically.

IFYC returns to not having a mission or vision formally stated in the 2011 Annual Report, although it does mention that IFYC seeks “to inspire and train student leaders of different faiths to work together to improve their communities and serve others.”<sup>45</sup> This suggests IFYC’s focus is on training social activists who can mobilize different faith communities and the further establishment of using religion as social capital. The phrase I quoted from the 2011 Annual Report is IFYC’s mission statement in the 2012 Report along with making interfaith cooperation a social norm. As in the past three reports, a vision statement is lacking here and continues to be in the 2013 and 2014 reports.

IFYC returns to having no mission statement formally stated in their 2013 Annual Report. The closest thing resembling a mission statement is a list of three goals: 1) training a critical mass of college students to be interfaith leaders and creating a network of alumni committed to interfaith work; 2) build sustainable interfaith cooperation on college campuses across the nation; 3) elevating the voices of young interfaith leaders to change the public perception of religion as source of violence to a source of social service. Religion as a source of social capital is deeply embedded in these goals, but any mention of religious identity or

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<sup>44</sup> Interfaith Youth Core, 2010 Annual Report, <https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/2010%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> Interfaith Youth Core, 2011 Annual Report, [https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/2011\\_Annual%20Report\\_Online.pdf](https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/audit/2011_Annual%20Report_Online.pdf)

theological and spiritual growth are absent. Whether or not these are implicitly implied in these goals, it is clear they are not a point of focus in the goals IFYC has.

The 2014 Annual Report also does not have a formal mission statement. A quote from Rev. Fred Davie included in the report mentions IFYC's mission to make interfaith cooperation a cultural norm. It is reasonable to infer from the tone of this report and the 2012 and 2013 reports that, had a formal mission statement been included, it would have been along the lines of Rev. Davie's quote.

While it is reasonable for an emerging organization to have a fluctuating mission and vision as it develops its identity, I think IFYC is established enough by 2010 at the latest that it should have been more consistent in its mission and vision. It certainly should have had them formally stated in its annual reports. This is true of the Annual Reports in general. There were a few reports where the mission and vision were clearly indicated by a heading, but oftentimes they were casually mentioned in Patel's introduction or within the report content.

Currently IFYC still does not have a formal mission or vision statement. When I asked a staff member about this, she said the mission statement will essentially focus on furthering interfaith work in higher education through a variety of means.<sup>46</sup> Heralding Heschel's belief that "faith is a prerequisite for interfaith," I wondered why IFYC removed the sentiment of encouraging young people to strengthen their religious identities from their mission statements after 2004. When I asked an IFYC staff member about the omission and she said:

While we certainly want individuals of particular identities to do all of the things articulated in the 2004 mission, I think (and this is just me drawing my own conclusions, to be clear) changing the hearts and minds of individuals on a case-by-case basis doesn't shape a norm in the way that institutional change does. So if the vision is always to make interfaith cooperation a social norm, we have to ask ourselves: what is going to achieve that best within our existing social structure? Is it getting as many individuals in touch with IFYC programs and leading with that? Or is it to

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<sup>46</sup> Email correspondence, August 19, 2015. Confidentiality maintained per mutual agreement.

inject interfaith cooperation directly into the institution of higher education (having campus interfaith spaces, interfaith cooperation in college mission statements, building an academic field of interfaith studies, fostering Better Together as a campus extra-curricular opportunity, etc.)? I think we're putting our money on the latter because it will ultimately change campus cultures while also impacting individual perspectives along the way.<sup>47</sup>

While it is true that focusing on shared values and service makes interfaith more appealing to younger generations and thus spreads the idea of interfaith to more people, how sustainable is this method? Does it preserve the faith that Heschel says is inherent to interfaith? Can interfaith cooperation become a social norm if traditional religious practice is not sustained? Can interfaith exist without religious institutions?

Disjoint as they are, IFYC's set of mission and vision statements as a whole exhibit a noticeable shift in focus. A commitment to fostering religious identity fades from their mission statement within the first year and only reappears briefly in the guise of religious pluralism in the 2008 report. Over the years IFYC's visions and missions become increasingly socially and politically oriented and focused on training youth leaders who can mobilize people from different religions to cooperate on service projects.

### ***Use of Religious-focused vs. Social-focused Words***

The shift toward a sociological interpretation and implementation of interfaith is also evident looking at the use of certain words throughout the Annual Reports. I chose four words I believe are indicative of religious interfaith focus—"religious identity," "dialogue," "pluralism," and "religion"—and four indicative of a social or civic focus—"service," "cooperation," "leader/leadership," and "society"—and calculated how many times they were used in each report. The chart of results can be found in Appendix B.

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<sup>47</sup> Email correspondence, August 19, 2015. Confidentiality maintained per mutual agreement.

The results indicate that there is not only a significantly greater social focus, but also that interpersonal religious focus has declined in successive years. “Religious identity” was only used in the first two years and the use of “dialogue” has decreased in successive years, not being used at all in the past two. “Pluralism” spiked in the 2008 report, where it was one of the main themes, but has since then been used in one other issue. The instances of “religion” are more variable among issues, although its use has still been on the lower side in recent years.

In contrast, when analyzed according to the number of pages in each issue, the use of the society-focused words has remained relatively steady over the years. In general, “cooperation” and “leader/leadership” appear at least once per page. “Society” is the only word that is used less than each of the religious-focused words. The number of times society-focused words are used is also significantly higher than religious-focused words. The combined total of the number of times religious-focused words are used (126 times) is less than the total of any one of the society-focused words, except “society.”

To be clear, a societal and service focus is not necessarily a bad thing. Service is at the core of most, if not all religions, and IFYC has accomplished incredible things in terms of social justice. Religion, though, is about more than service. There is something deep and profound in religion that comes from its traditions and rituals. It follows, then, that interfaith needs to be more than a religiously diverse group of people working on service projects together. This happens all the time in secular service organizations. Religious diversity is present, but not acknowledged. As in Diana Eck’s definition of pluralism, to be interfaith requires having an encounter of commitments and dialogue. It encourages people to delve deeper into their own spirituality. Of course IFYC is not *just* a religiously diverse group of youth working on service projects together. Students are encouraged to think about and discuss why their religious

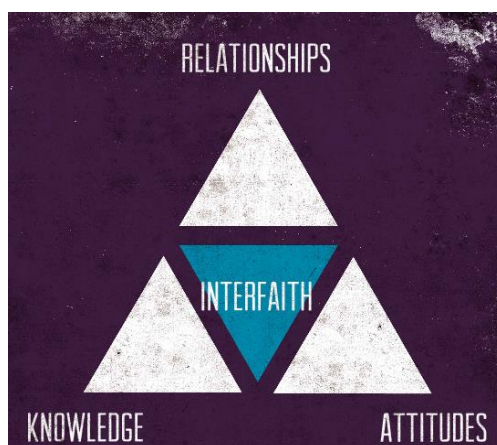
traditions inspire them to do service, but does having service, cooperation, and leadership as focal points inadvertently encouraging youth to connect to their religion primarily in terms of service and neglect the ritual aspects? To what extent does authentic dialogue and personal exploration of one's own religion take place in IFYC's programming? To answer these questions we need to look at IFYC's methodology and programs themselves.

## Part 3: IFYC Today

### Methodology

#### *Science of Interfaith Cooperation*

IFYC’s methodology has two main components. The first is called the “science of interfaith cooperation.” It is represented by a triangle whose three points are relationship, knowledge, and action:



The reason they call this the “science” of interfaith cooperation is because scientists tend to measure religious diversity by measuring attitudes, relationships, and knowledge of different religions:

And so what we are saying is an effective interfaith program is a program in which people walk out with better attitudes towards other religious traditions, with more relationships with people from other religious backgrounds and with more appreciative knowledge and an effective interfaith leader is a—is a leader who can create a program in which people increase on their attitudes, their relationships and their knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

The logic behind the interfaith triangle is that positive knowledge leads to positive attitudes, which lead to relationships, which in turn create openness to more knowledge. As the quote

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<sup>48</sup> “Building Religious Pluralism,” Council on Foreign Relations, Religion and Foreign Policy Conference Call, June 16, 2015, accessed April 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/religion/building-religious-pluralism/p36652>



above mentions, the knowledge IFYC is referring to is what they call appreciative knowledge—knowledge about the positive aspects of different religions, and often takes the form of identifying shared values. In this way, the interfaith triangle is very sociological in nature.

Sociological and shared value approaches have been shown to be very effective at bringing people from different religious perspectives together to cooperate and build positive relationships, but they avoid the deeper theological questions as these can be seen as sources of conflict. While I agree that starting with questions of theology may not always be the ideal way to start relationship building, questions of theology should not be entirely excluded from interfaith discussions. If we are, as Diana Eck says, to come to the table with our commitments—of which theology is an essential part—we need to be free to engage the full extent of our commitments. By “engage” I do not mean asserting the superiority and validity of one’s own beliefs over and above others, but expressing them in a way as to inform others as to what they are and giving them a sense perspective. Engagement that emerges from one’s own religious commitment facilitates attitudes and relationships exemplary of authentic interfaith; attitudes that hold other religions in high regard without sacrificing reverence and esteem for one’s own, and relationships that encourage each person to unreservedly express all aspects of their identity. Therefore, in terms of engendering an authentic interfaith environment, knowledge of theology—or at the very least knowledge of different religions’ traditions—should be explicitly stated in the knowledge section of the interfaith triangle.

As IFYC states, a good interfaith leader is someone who can enable people to increase their positive knowledge, attitudes, and relationships. How the interfaith triangle is put into practice is laid out in the second aspect of IFYC’s methodology: the “art of interfaith leadership.”

*Art of interfaith leadership*

IFYC defines the art of interfaith leadership in terms of “people who create and foster opportunities for positive knowledge and opportunities for engagement move others around the interfaith triangle and lead to a community marked by pluralism.”<sup>49</sup> Patel says that there are three things an interfaith leader needs: 1) the vision that interfaith understanding and cooperation are possible; 2) knowledge of shared values and history of interfaith cooperation; and 3) a theology of interfaith cooperation – how a person’s own tradition inspires them to take part in interfaith cooperation, and the skills to tell their story of interfaith enrichment compellingly, speak to people from diverse religious backgrounds in a way that cultivates trust and respect, and organize events that bring people from different religions together.<sup>50</sup>

The vision piece is self-explanatory. It is impossible to be an interfaith leader without believing interfaith understanding and cooperation are possible. The second piece—knowledge of shared values and the history of interfaith cooperation—encompasses what Patel calls interfaith literacy. The traditional definition of interfaith literacy is having knowledge of different religion’s practices, beliefs, and traditions. Patel takes this a step further and specifies it as appreciative knowledge of other religions, the ability to identify points of contact among religions, knowledge of the history of interfaith cooperation, and knowledge of shared values—such as compassion, mercy, and hospitality—that exist within different religions.<sup>51</sup> He says the knowledgebase formed from kind of interfaith literacy he describes is required for an interfaith

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<sup>49</sup> “About the Movement,” IFYC, accessed April 2016, <https://www.ifyc.org/about>

<sup>50</sup> Eboo Patel, “New Rooms in the Interfaith Movement,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Vol. 43, Nos. 1 & 2 (2015), accessed April 2016, <http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winterspring2015/new-rooms-interfaith-movement>  
 Edited version of the Greeley Lecture for Peace and Social Justice at Harvard Divinity School, which Patel delivered on October 25, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Eboo Patel, “Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities,” *Journal of College & Character*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (2011), 5, accessed April 2016, <http://www.cic.edu/News-and-Publications/Multimedia-Library/CICConferencePresentations/2015%20Presidents%20Institute/20150106-Developing%20Interfaith%20Cooperation%20on%20Campus%202.pdf>

leader to build bridges between people and communities that orient around religion differently because it creates a starting place for positive conversations.<sup>52</sup>

The final piece—a theology of interfaith cooperation—represents what Patel deems a “public language of faith.” Patel believes that people do not talk about faith because they do not know how to relate it to their everyday life. A public language of faith as a way of speaking that emphasizes how one’s commitment to their faith tradition enriches broader society. It is an expression of how being a faithful [insert religious tradition] makes one a better citizen. In this way, Patel believes it connects us to our religious tradition while enabling us to be citizens of a diverse society.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Appraisal of Methodology*

The structure of IFYC’s methodology itself is good. The interactions between knowledge, relationships, and attitudes are the cruxes of interfaith work and they are in part dependent upon having an understanding of the history of interfaith cooperation, shared values among religious traditions, and having a way to express how one’s faith relates to other aspects of their life. It is effective for making people aware of interfaith and bringing people together to address social issues developing a public language of faith. The structure itself also coincides with Eck’s and Heschel’s perspectives. The interactions between knowledge, relationships, and attitudes can facilitate energetic engagement, active seeking of understanding, dialogue, an encounter of commitments, and nurture individual faith.

This being said, as it stands being defined almost exclusively through the lens of shared values and cooperation, it falls short of Eck’s and Heschel’s ideals and sustainable interfaith.

While it succeeds at helping people develop their public language of faith, it may do so at the

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<sup>52</sup> “Religious Literacy: How Knowing Your Neighbor Can Save the World,” Harvard Divinity School, YouTube video, 1:01:13, posted [February, 2014], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2hv0jeJZhA>

<sup>53</sup> Patel, *Acts of Faith*, 21.

expense of their “private” language of faith. I think people are struggling equally, if not more, with their “private” language of faith. Part of this is the responsibility of religious institutions, but heralding Heschel’s statement that interfaith presupposes faith, interfaith should challenge people to think more deeply about their religion’s beliefs and traditions. Interfaith rightly should include a public language of faith, but it also needs to include discussion of particulars and encourage people to explore them within their own and other traditions. We lose the distinctiveness of religions if people do not know their private language of faith, causing interfaith interactions to become multi-faith or religiously diverse ones instead. IFYC could resolve these issues by more intentionally including discussion of personal faith and unique aspects of religious traditions and theologies into its methodology.

## **Programs**

### *Better Together*

The Better Together campaign is one of IFYC’s foundational programs. It is “a national movement of students that are bringing together people of different religious and non-religious backgrounds to work toward a common goal. It's a network *for students, by students* - a place where [they] can come together and work to make interfaith cooperation a priority on [their] campus.”<sup>54</sup> The name comes from Patel’s vision of using interfaith cooperation to counteract the voices that proclaim that people from different religions are better apart. The purpose of Better Together is to engaged religiously/philosophically diverse students across lines of difference and make interfaith cooperation a priority through interfaith social action.<sup>55</sup> Better Together looks different on every campus, but they all share the goal of making interfaith cooperation a priority through interfaith action.

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<sup>54</sup> “About Better Together,” IFYC, accessed April 2016, <http://www.ifyc.org/about-better-together>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

The top ten Better Together events and the way IFYC describes them indicates what IFYC's goals are in terms of Better Together and what they perceive as its purpose on college campuses. They are listed and described by IFYC as follows:<sup>56</sup>

1. *Talk Better Together*: This is the baby of interfaith dialogue and speed dating. Divide people into two groups and have them answer questions about why they are motivated to make the world a better place.
2. *Fast-a-thon*: Participants fast for a day and donate the money they would have spent on food to a cause. At the end of the day, everyone comes together to break the fast and reflect on their experiences. Creates the space to learn more about the importance of fasting in different religious traditions.
3. *Collection Drive*: Identify an organization that is in need of a particular item or set of items and petition your campus to collect that item. In conjunction with the collection, hold a Talk Better Together event where people can talk about what from their religious or philosophical perspective inspires them to make the world a better place.
4. *Hunger Banquet*: Models the unjust distribution of food in the broader society. Each participant receives a ticket that assigns them to an income tier, the number of tickets for each tier reflecting the number of people globally living at each tier. Higher tiers get a more nutritious meal. After the meal, invite people to reflect on their experience and how it relates to their religious or ethical values, and plan how they can take action to address these issues.
5. *Service Fair*: Brings together different service clubs, religious organizations, and community groups in one place where attendees can participate in multiple small service projects. These could include assembling care packages for local domestic violence centers, writing letters to residents of nursing homes, and making bread that will be donated to a homeless shelter. While these service projects are going on, have people publically reflect why their religious or non-religious tradition calls them to do service.
6. *Clean-up*: Have people from different religious and philosophical viewpoints come together to clean a place in their local area. It is easy to mobilize people from diverse religious and philosophical viewpoints to help and reflect on why this matters to them because taking care of the environment is an important part of many religions and ethical viewpoints.

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<sup>56</sup> "10 Popular Better Together Campaign Events," IFYC, accessed April 2016, descriptions paraphrased, [https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/better-resources/10%20Events\\_small.pdf](https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/better-resources/10%20Events_small.pdf)

7. *Rapid Response Action*: Creating a plan to respond for responding to natural or human-made disasters in the world, whether that be through fundraising money, donating supplies, or holding an interfaith vigil to stand in solidarity with those who are mourning.
8. *Film Screening*: Find a movie that explains the importance of an action issue. Have a discussion afterwards about what people learned, how their religious or secular values inspire them to address the issue in the movie, and what they can do together to address the issue.
9. *Photo Campaign*: Take pictures of people holding signs answering questions such as “Why do you serve?” or, “Why do you think we’re Better Together?”. Upload the pictures to Facebook to show the face of religious diversity on campus.
10. *Dialogue Dinner*: Free dinners where participants have a chance to talk about various topics related to interfaith such as “Why are you inspired to do service work?” or, “What does your tradition say about the importance of taking care of your fellow human beings?”.

While all these events are good in and of themselves, and although many of them have the potential to facilitate the kind of dialogue that enriches both a person’s understanding of their own religion and other religions, the way they are currently described in some ways undermines this kind of dialogue from happening. The focus of all these events is clearly service. In some cases, it seems interfaith dialogue comes as an afterthought. Additionally, none of their descriptions include a reference to specific aspects of religion besides the one for Fast-a-thons. Talk Better Togethers, film showings, and dialogue dinners specifically can all be geared towards certain religions or specific aspects of religion (practices, theology, symbols etc.), but IFYC chose instead to explicitly gear them towards service and universal values. There are campuses, such as my own, that do incorporate specific topics about religions in their events, but religion itself clearly is not IFYC’s top priority for Better Together. The way IFYC describes them reinforces my assertion that they are moving away from the religious aspects of interfaith,

and therefore away from the dialogue and religious commitment that Heschel and Eck say are necessary in authentic interfaith.

The five different awards IFYC gives out to different campuses each year is also indicative of its priorities for Better Together. The following is a brief description of each award.<sup>57</sup>

1. *Best Overall Campaign*: Given to the campus with the clearest vision for interfaith cooperation, provides opportunities for to voice, engage, and act, effectively mobilizes large numbers of participants, is creative, has high quality leadership, and involves staff, faculty, and administration
2. *Biggest Campus Impact*: Given to the campus that most effectively engages different sections of campus, involves staff, faculty, or administration or gets them to make public statements of support, and shares their interfaith message in the classroom
3. *Most Inspiring Action*: Given to the campus whose campaign includes a clearly articulated social action issue(s), approaches the issue in an innovated way, shows impressive results in addressing the issue including demonstrating the ability to involve and educate others, has a significant number of dollars raised, hours served, or goods donated, has a high number of people involved in raising funds or service, shows evidence of participants' increased awareness and understanding of the issue, and receives praise from those impacted by its work
4. *Rookie of the Year*: Given to a campus that has just started a Better Together Campaign and shows strong leadership, ability to make connections with other organizations on campus, organizes effective events, has a sound vision and plan for the future, and shows evidence of having starting to change the conversation around religion on campus
5. *Better Together Day*: Given to the campus who raises the volume on the story of interfaith cooperation the most on Better Together Day by having a high number of pledges, creatively uses Better Together Day to raise awareness about interfaith cooperation, has a significant impact, and involves multiple parts of campus

The criteria for these awards are primarily based on activism and the extent to which campuses mobilize their religious diversity to make an impact on campus and in their community. To what

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<sup>57</sup> "Campus Awards," IFYC, accessed April 2016, <https://www.ifyc.org/content/campus-awards>

extent is dialogue involved? Does it get pushed to the backburner in the effort to have a strong impact on a social justice issue? I acknowledge that concrete service, leadership, and the number and demographics of those involved are easier to assess than things such as interfaith literacy and the quality of dialogue, but it would be valuable to include these in the criterion for some of their awards. As they are now, the awards provide incentives to engage as many people as possible in interfaith cooperation and service, but exclude more interpersonal aspects of interfaith.

### *Interfaith Leadership Institutes (ILI)*

Interfaith Leadership Institutes (ILI) are IFYC's premier training programs. They are three day workshops held twice throughout the year and their goal is to equip students and their campus allies (staff and faculty) to build relationships among people with diverse religious and non-religious identities on their campus and engage it in interfaith cooperation.

IFYC's method for accomplishing this goal includes a 1.0 and 2.0 track. The 1.0 is for those coming to an ILI for the first time and is based on a sequence of three ideas:

*Voice:* How do you define your personal identity and religious/philosophical identity? What got you involved/interested in interfaith work?

*Engage:* How do you get different religious/non-religious groups on your campus involved in interfaith cooperation? How do you handle conflict and "hot topics"?

*Act:* How do you organize around issues relevant to your campus? What will you take back to campus?

The 2.0 track focuses on evaluation, sustaining interfaith cooperation on campus, and continuing interfaith leadership after graduation. As students' perspectives of interfaith are cultivated primarily in the 1.0 track, I am going to focus on the 1.0 training sessions. ILI's are three day conferences. Each day has a different theme. The first is *voice*, the second *engage*, and the third *act*. The voice session focuses on storytelling. Students create and discuss a map of



what brought them to interfaith and are introduced to values that are shared among religions. The session on engagement concentrates on teaching students how to get their campus involved in Better Together. Students create a map of the different organizations and resources available on campus they could connect with to advocate their events and message of interfaith cooperation. They also address ways to involve the non-religious members and organizations on campus. Act, the final session, exposes students to potential conflicts they may experience during their Better Together Campaign and gives them examples of possible service projects they could do on campus. The main activity in regard to potential conflict students might encounter on campus is called “Hot Seat.” In this activity, a conflict scenario is presented, an IFYC staff member acts as the antagonist, and students take turns sitting in the “hot seat” in which they have to address the situation in real time. Another IFYC staff member periodically stops the conversation, at which point another student takes the hot seat and has to continue from where the previous student left off. After a scenario is concluded, students discuss as a group, what was effective and ineffective and give suggestions for how the situation could have been handled more effectively. In the service project portion of the session, students share examples for service projects they have or that their campus has done, as well as watch a video depicting what other campuses that are involved in Better Together have done.

The closest thing to interfaith dialogue in these sessions are when students discuss their map what brought them to interfaith and hot seat because some of the scenarios involve conflicts resulting from differing religious beliefs or practices. For example, in my group, we had a scenario where a student was uncomfortable because they felt the Evangelical Christian students were trying to force their religion on them and they wanted to emphasize the safe space rules,

particularly the one about no proselytizing, at every meeting and event the Better Together Campaign on their campus put on.

The two other major events of ILI are the unconference session and speedfaithing. The unconference session gives students the chance to discuss topics they are passionate about.

Below is the board of topics from the ILI I attended in August of 2015:



These topics fall into three main categories—interfaith and social justice, engaging other groups in interfaith work, and interfaith leadership. While personal religious development and interfaith literacy and dialogue did have a presence, these tables were not as popular. Specifically, the table for fostering personal faith was empty for the first session and when people came during the second the conversation turned to whether it was important to be committed to a faith. The

consensus leaned more towards a strong religious commitment as not being essential in interfaith work.

While representative of how college students view interfaith because students chose the topics, this indicates how college students in general view interfaith. Specifically, it suggests that faith itself is not the main focus for most college students and that they see faith as a means to an end – that end being service. This may also represent IFYC's influence as many of the topics on the board were topics we had previously discussed in our training sessions.

Speedfaithing consists of twenty minute sessions—ten to present and ten to answer questions—where people from different religious traditions and worldviews talk about their tradition/worldview. While relatively unstructured, presenters are advised to give basic information about their religion/worldview, share what it means to them, highlight a shared value, and address misconceptions. This is a lot to cover in ten minutes, hence why it is called speedfaithing. At the ILI I attended, speedfaithing was the favorite event of many of the students because it gave them the chance to learn about religious/philosophical traditions with which they were previously unfamiliar. I agree that speedfaithing is a good way to introduce people to different religious traditions but I have one cautionary piece of advice. Based on the sessions I attended, it seemed that religious particulars were sometimes pushed aside and the emphasis placed instead on shared values. Religion is about more than shared values; it is also about unique beliefs and traditions and hence any type of session meant to educate people about a particular religion should focus equally, if not more, on specific aspects of that religion's tradition as well as values it shares with other religions.

### *Appraisal of ILI*

Looking back on my ILI experience as a whole, certain strengths and weaknesses readily come to mind:

#### Strengths

- Exposes participants to interfaith
- Teaches participants how to mobilize religiously diverse groups of people toward social action
- Connects students, IFYC staff, and alumni
- Teaches participants how interfaith can be a bridge of cooperation
- Inspires students
- Teach students how to voice their story
- Gives participants tools for handling conflict if it arises their interfaith group or events
- Makes young adults, who in general avoid anything that has to do with religion, interested in it

#### Weakness

- With the focus on interfaith action and the effort to be inclusive, sometimes the importance individual faith was lost
- Makes faith out to be primarily a source of social capital
- The emphasis is on why a person is involved in interfaith, but not why *as a member of their religious/non-religious tradition* they are involved in interfaith
- Not enough time was spent learning about specific aspects of different religious traditions. Many people I talked to wished we had spent more time speedfaithing

In general, I would say ILIs are worthwhile programs. Connecting people who are interested in interfaith and fueling excitement for interfaith is valuable. I think ILIs have the untapped potential to engage people with their own faith as well as interfaith cooperation, and that they would have a more significant impact if they did so.

Although I was not able to have access to student evaluations of ILI due to privacy reasons, I did receive comments from three students with whom I spoke:

*Student 1:* "I help people because I love people. I don't see how faith is a part of what we are learning."

*Student 2:* “I took away that stories matter and every individual’s experience of their identity and their religion is important. ‘My understanding of Christianity’ or ‘My upbringing in Islam’ etc.”

*Student 3:* “A focus on personal spirituality/religious identification. I realize that many students (including myself) struggle with labels and identifying with one specific faith tradition...however, I think it is important to realize that what is bringing us together is just that: FAITH. Oftentimes this felt like it was missing from the conversation, which was unfortunate. I think that the ILI did a marvelous job of facilitating discussions around effective networking and campus organizing and how to encourage students to rally around a common cause...however, I would have been interested to piece together where faith comes into play and especially how to cultivate personal spiritual growth (whatever that may be...even for non-religious individuals it is still important to be involved in community and we must recognize that this is an interFAITH organization). That is where it felt like it was lacking and helping us as students examine and discuss WHY we do what we do. Sometimes, I honestly don't know...obviously it's for the greater good and I enjoy it and am interested but can't make the connection myself to religion or where that fits in which I think is an essential part of the mission of the IFYC. It would have been helpful to talk through that more and listen to people find importance in choosing a label and committing to a tradition, even if they cannot fully support everything in that institution.”

The last quote articulates well what I felt myself at the end of the ILI. Faith wasn’t absent, but I often felt it was subordinate to mobilization around social justice issues. Did I learn skills to address potential problems in campus interfaith work? Absolutely! Did I learn ways to be inclusive? Yes! Did I learn why it is important to be grounded in my own tradition or how

engage in dialogue about theological differences? Not as much. It appears IFYC assumes discussions about religious tradition and theology will occur organically, but in my experience this is usually not case, especially among younger generations.

## **Part 4: Appraisal**

### *Strengthening Religious Identity: Alumni Responses*

Much of my criticism of IFYC stems from my belief that they are not sufficiently fostering personal religious identity and commitment. In light of this, it would be wrong to omit the fact that there are many people who say their involvement in IFYC has strengthened their religious identity and commitment to their religion. This being said, “religious identity” and “commitment” mean different things to different people, and thus I wanted to see what kind of religious identity and commitment IFYC was producing. I also wanted to see how those who had been involved in IFYC’s programming assessed it according to Diana Eck’s definition of pluralism. To do this I chose to focus on people who were involved in IFYC and are now religious and/or interfaith leaders. My reasons for this was because due to privacy reasons, I was not able to access evaluations from the students who attended the ILI in August 2015 and I also think focusing on current religious leaders gives an indication of the direction the interfaith movement is heading and the role IFYC is playing in it. I contacted twenty-six people and received responses from eleven. I chose people whose profiles indicated they identified with a religion because my questions focused on the role IFYC has played in shaping it. The questions pertained to their involvement in IFYC, involvement in their religious tradition, religious identity, how IFYC effected their religious identity, their evaluation of IFYC according to Eck’s definition of pluralism, their perspective of the decline in participation in institutional religion, and the role institutional religion plays in their life and interfaith work. Full transcriptions of the responses can be found in Appendix A.<sup>58</sup>

### *Demographics*

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<sup>58</sup> I have transcripts for all but two of the alumni who responded. The two I do not have transcripts I talked to over the phone. I have notes from our conversation so if you have any questions, contact me.

The majority of people were affiliated to a religious tradition. Two people were not—one not affiliated at all and one having been raised Catholic and is now not affiliated with any religious institution, and two people had mixed-faith identities, one identifying as a “Anglo-Catholic-Baptist,” and one as Catholic-Hindu. Only two people regularly attend their religious institution’s services.

### *Religious Identity in Interfaith Work*

The majority thought having a strong religious identity is important in general, but not that important in interfaith work. What is more important is the commitment to building relationships with people who have different beliefs. It is important to include those who are unsure of their identity because they are the ones who will hopefully benefit from participation in interfaith. One person remarked that, although she does not have a strong religious identity, she feels her contribution to interfaith dialogue has been just as rich as anyone else’s. There were a few people who felt having a strong religious identity, or a strong sense of rootedness in one’s religious tradition, is necessary in interfaith work.

### *IFYC’s Influence on Religious Identity*

The majority of people said their religious identity was strengthened by their participation in IFYC, but they usually meant commitment to their religion, not traditional practice. For those whose religious identity was strengthened, it was because of dialogue. Storytelling and dialogue inspired them to go deeper into their own faith, helped them see how their faith intersected with other faiths, and improved their ability to articulate their beliefs. As one person commented, “Simply by being in dialogue about one’s own beliefs/values, and listening to others’ beliefs/values, is a clarifying and enlightening experience. It causes you to dig deeper into something that you may have ignored for years, but more than that, you do so with a lens toward



understanding a shared humanity despite different beliefs.” For those whose religious identity wasn’t strengthened, their commitment to serve was strengthened.

### *Decline in Religious Affiliation*

Only one person thought the decline in religious affiliation is a problem for interfaith in general. The majority said it was problematic for religious institutions, but not for interfaith or IFYC, one person commenting that religious affiliation is only declining in the industrialized West. Some thought the decline would challenge and benefit the interfaith movement, requiring it to develop a more nuanced view of faith and what it means to be religious.

### *IFYC and Pluralism*

While there were a few people who said IFYC excels in every area of pluralism, similar to my own observations, the majority said IFYC excels at energetic engagement with the diversity and active seeking of understanding across lines of difference and could improve at engaging real differences and encounter of commitments. The consensus was that while IFYC produces transformational relationships among college students, it runs the risk of watering down religious difference and being an echo chamber of people who have different beliefs but share similar politics and social values.

### *Discussion*

In general the overall assessment was very positive. Everyone I interviewed believed IFYC was a good entry point for interfaith and that it created transformational relationships among college students from different faith and spiritual traditions.

It is interesting that the majority of people thought having a strong religious identity is important in general, but not important in interfaith work. Similar to Patel, they saw being an incubator for social activism as one of the main purposes of interfaith. Multiple people expressed

their desire for interfaith—and IFYC specifically—to become more involved in social issues, such as racial discrimination and other ideological differences, that it has up to this point only been casually involved in. One comment was, “You don’t need religion to be moral,” and, although this sentiment cannot be applied to the group of alumni in general, I think it does raise a valid point. I think one of the reasons the importance of religious identity can be lost in interfaith is because interfaith, especially among the younger generations, is thought of in terms of service and morality. IFYC recently said it is no longer a campaign but a movement. Interfaith is also becoming a movement. From the work I do for an online interfaith journal called the Interfaith Observer, I have learned that interfaith is becoming integrated into every aspect of society. Interfaith has the extraordinary potential to engender change, but we need to be careful not to just use religious diversity as a tool but also engage with the religious side of religious diversity. While service is a major part of interfaith, it cannot be reduced to service, and while having a strong religious identity cannot be a requirement for interfaith work, as then only a small fraction of people could participate, I think interfaith must encourage people to develop their religious identity. Because there are still enough people who have a strong religious identity people forget that interfaith cannot exist without them. If the majority of people decide having a strong religious identity is not important, interfaith will disintegrate.

### ***Final Appraisal***

As I mentioned in the introduction, IFYC is doing excellent work, particularly in terms of bringing students from different religions together and social justice work. They are successfully building social capital through religion, using religion, as Patel says, to build bridges instead of bombs. This being said, based on the analysis I have done, I think IFYC lacks the emphasis on theology and religion necessary for authentic interfaith engagement, as it does not subscribe to

Heschel's belief that interfaith presupposes faith. The faith IFYC requires is the faith in the power of interfaith to create social change.

Heschel believed many religions are valid, insisting that "the Jews do not maintain that the way of the Torah is the only way of serving God," but he was also passionate about his own religion, regarding the Hebrew Bible as the greatest of all books: "Set the Bible beside any of the truly great works produced by the genius of man, and see how they are diminished in stature. . . . Other books you can estimate, you can measure, compare; the Bible you can only extol. Its insights surpass our standards. There is nothing greater."<sup>59</sup> Interfaith does not have to be, and should not be, a strictly theological matter, but it needs to include theology. It should not exclude those who are searching or unsure of their faith, but it should challenge everyone to further explore and nurture the faith they have. One of the people I interviewed said it well:

[W]e need religion (or something beyond ourselves) to hold onto in our spiritual journeys and quests, otherwise the world of spirituality is too vast and big for us to make sense of by ourselves. . . . In other words, I think we all need something tangible to hold onto for security and certainty and for knowledge (we all need some black and white), in order to venture into the intangible (the gray area) . . . I don't say all of this to imply that those who identify as "spiritual but not religious" are lost or confused, or to pass judgment, but rather that we all need a place to stand.<sup>60</sup>

In order for interfaith to continue to exist, this place to stand needs to correspond to a specific religion.

Regarding Diana Eck's definition of religious pluralism, IFYC is strong in some parts, but lacking in others.

*Encounter of commitments:* There are certainly people with strong religious commitments who participate in IFYC, but having a strong religious commitment is neither emphasized nor necessary. It seems that IFYC's own commitment to service and civic self-identification in some

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<sup>59</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 240.

<sup>60</sup> Email correspondence, anonymity preserved up on request.

ways inhibits it from being a place where participants experience a true encounter of commitments.

*Dialogue:* Dialogue is definitely an important part of IFYC, evident by “voice” being one of the three elemental themes of Better Together, but IFYC form of dialogue omits the discussion of theology and difference that is a crucial part of Eck’s definition. As important as it is to find common ground, to identify ways we can work together despite our differences, and to develop a public language of faith, it is equally important to understand and respect the differences and to feel comfortable expressing our unique religious beliefs. IFYC’s programs have the potential to—and in some cases do—create space to have these deeper conversations, but the way they are structure often unintentionally discourages discussion of theology or religious difference. They believe these deeper, more personal, discussions will occur naturally, but in many cases they do not. In my experience with IFYC, people were usually hesitant about talking about their specific beliefs.

*Energetic engagement with religious diversity:* IFYC excels in this area. They bring together thousands of religiously diverse students across the nation. In this respect, there is no other organization that compares to them. They have been the catalyst for encouraging campuses to engage their religious diversity.

*Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference:* IFYC excels in this area as well. The goal behind every program it puts on is to bring people together across lines of difference to promote the common good and improve society. They believe college students can be the interfaith leaders needed to make religion a bridge rather than a barrier<sup>61</sup> and they are committed to helping become interfaith leaders.

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<sup>61</sup> “About the Movement,” IFYC, accessed April 2016, <https://www.ifyc.org/about>

While IFYC's goal is not to reduce all religions to a common set of principles, the combination of focusing primarily on shared values and the current trend away from religious institutions is causing IFYC to in some sense do so. This is the danger of neglecting religious ritual. The values religions share are essential, but religion is so much more than them. The rituals and traditions together with the deep meaning behind them are the foundations of these shared values. Shared values enable us to work together and form positive relationships, but they are only truly effective at fostering coexistence when they are coupled with discussion of differences. Lack of this discussion perpetuates religious misperceptions and inadvertently encourages people to separate their religious ritual life from their interfaith work and life in society.

One of Patel's main arguments for IFYC is that if we want to win the battle against religious extremism we have to involve youth in organizations that foster appreciation for religious diversity rather than hatred of it, and studies and experience have shown that the best way to connect people with different beliefs and ideologies is by engaging shared values and participating in cooperative service. I agree that using what is common and participating in concrete action are essential for resolving conflict and cultivating relationship among people with differing beliefs, but is it beneficial to neglect the traditional and theological aspects of religion? My concern is that, in light of religious plurality, future generations will continue to move away from traditional religious practices and we will lose the religious traditions that make interfaith so inspirational. A world in which religious pluralism and interfaith engagement are the norm requires an equal commitment to both individual religion and interfaith, and requires people to have the knowledge and confidence to publically express their specific beliefs.

In review of my research on IFYC, I conclude that it is more aptly called a multi-faith service organization rather than an interfaith organization. It brings people from different religions together to do service work, but does not engage them in the theological dialogue nor foster the personal religious commitments that Heschel and Eck maintain are essential aspects of interfaith engagement and religious pluralism.

## **Part 5: What can be done? Bringing theology and faith back into IFYC**

What do faith and theology bring to interfaith? Heschel says, “I suggest that the most significant basis for meeting of men of different religious traditions is the level of fear and trembling, of humility and contrition, where our individual moments of faith are mere waves in the endless ocean of mankind's reaching out for God, where all formulations and articulations appear as understatement, where our souls are swept away by the awareness of the urgency of answering God's commandment, while stripped of pretension and conceit we sense the tragic insufficiency of human faith.”<sup>62</sup> The divine, the transcendent, the “beyond us,” is impossible to fully understand. Each faith provides a unique experience of transcendence. Embracing other faiths in interfaith work does not mean we relinquish commitment to our own, but instead that we allow our commitment to enrich, and be enriched by, other faiths. As Heschel says, “Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us.”<sup>63</sup> We can't achieve the full fruit of interfaith if we disregard or relinquish some of our distinctive beliefs for the sake of compromise.

One aspect of faith is the need for ongoing conversion. Interfaith needs to leave open opportunities for conversion experiences, not conversion in the sense of converting to another religion, but conversion in the sense of a deepening of understanding and appreciation for both another's and one's own faith. It is not a loss or gain of faith, but a change in relationship. Converts to a religion learn how to practice and understand their faith fully. In the same way, in interfaith we need to learn how to practice encountering one another from within our own religious traditions and understand how to simultaneously embrace both our own faith and that of others. It's the “falling in love” that I mentioned in the introduction to this paper. This type of

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<sup>62</sup> Heschel, *No Religion is an Island*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

conversion is only possible when we enter interfaith through the lens of our own faith, when we are not afraid to express the foundational beliefs that define our religion, when we are willing to enter more deeply into our own faith. It is also only possible if we are willing to be uncomfortable and confused. These are part of the learning process. We learn how to concurrently embrace our own religion and others by working through the discomfort and confusion that result when we encounter beliefs that differ from our own and may challenge our own beliefs.

Theology is traditionally thought of as pertaining specifically to Christianity, but in its most general sense theology is the study of the nature of the transcendent and religious belief and, therefore, theology is part of all religions. It encompasses creed and doctrine, and lies at the intersection of religious beliefs and philosophy, ethics, mysticism, cosmology, and metaphysics.

Theology is often thought of as a source of discomfort in interfaith dialogue—and it undoubtedly can be at times—but it can actually help us work through the discomfort it evokes. Theology in all religions is an attempt to understand the transcendent and we can use this common belief in the transcendent as a starting point for dialogue about theological differences. As *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church's foundational document on its relationship with non-Christian religions, comments, “. . . there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history. . . . This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense. . . . [R]eligions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing ‘ways,’ comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions], October 28, 1965, Papal Archive, The Holy See, section 2, accessed April 20, 2016, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html)



Incorporating theology in interfaith also adds the concept of mystery to the conversation. For example, Jesus' resurrection and the transubstantiation of the Eucharist in Christianity, Muhammad's recitation of the Qur'an in Islam, Moses' conversation with God through the burning bush in Judaism, and the Ramayan in Hinduism—not to mention the nature of the transcendent for all religions—are all sources of mystery in their respective religions. Despite theological differences, one thing religions can agree on is that in our current state it is impossible to fully understand the transcendent, and acknowledging this fact allows us to engage our differences without evoking hostility.

Theology is also essential to growth in conviction and the understanding of both our own and other religions. Theology is about what we hold to be True, what is inherent to our religion. Although religious truths may not be the best way to start an interfaith discussion, if we never include them we are doing a disservice to ourselves and the other people involved. How can we genuinely understand someone from another religion and how to coexist if we do not understand what we each hold to be true and how it relates and contrasts? As Axel Takacs, a ThD candidate at Harvard Divinity School and co-founder and co-editor of its *Journal of Comparative Theology*, declares:

[I]n order to come to an understanding of another faith tradition as well as one's own, a theological engagement that does not eschew fundamental beliefs out of a sort of theological mawkishness is necessary. . . . Even though the Christian concepts of the Trinity and Incarnation, or religion without a codified sharia (law), may be a theological cacophony to the traditional Muslim of the Islamic world, it does not follow that a Christian must ignore these essential doctrines when engaging in dialogue; nor should a Christian ignore what Islam has to say about Truth simply because the Qur'an rejects the incarnation and Trinity in its own way. On the contrary, fruitful results are only possible when we remain firmly rooted and loyal to one tradition, yet open and vulnerable to the theology of another.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Axel Takacs, "Comparative Theology: (A Possible?) Next Level of Interreligious Dialogue," "Offerings on Interfaith Dialogue," President & Fellows of Harvard College, 2012, 22-25.

Sharing theological beliefs implies a degree of vulnerability and trust. It is saying, “I am going to share things that are integral to who I am because, even though I know you do not agree, I trust you enough to know you will respect them and that we can wrestle through them together.”

These exchanges—these moments of mutual self-gift—are when we move most directly towards coexistence. We will not attain true coexistence, will not authentically attain Eck’s religious pluralism, until we simultaneously exist and cooperate with one another and maintain our own religious identity.

What is the goal of interfaith? Being able to work together to better the world is definitely part of the goal—and a goal IFYC is excelling at achieving—but it is not the goal in and of itself. The goal of interfaith is to create a world where we can coexist; a world where religions can flourish, being enriched rather than undermined by the knowledge and traditions of others. As Heschel insists, “We must preserve our individuality as well as foster care for one another, reverence, understanding, cooperation. In the world of economics, science and technology, cooperation exists and continues to grow. Even political states, though different in culture and competing with one another, maintain diplomatic relations and strive for coexistence. Only religions are not on speaking terms.”<sup>66</sup> As with conversion, this is only possible when faith is present and we are willing to engage with the doctrinal and ritual aspects of both our own and other religions as well as identifying the values we share.

While IFYC is doing great work on the service front, based on my analysis, I fear that it is not sustainable in terms of the individual religious commitment that makes interfaith *interfaith*. A theology of interfaith cooperation should not replace our own theology. IFYC clearly is not intentionally trying to lead people away from traditional religion, but, in a generation already inclined away from institutional religion, its focus and the nature of its methodology and

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<sup>66</sup> Heschel, *No Religion is an Island*, 11.

programming seem to inadvertently do this in some cases. So what can be done? How do we encourage young adults to be passionate both about interfaith and the theology and traditions in their own religion? Just as Patel created IFYC because he wanted a program that combined faith, service, and diversity, I propose that IFYC offer a program that intentionally integrates theology, religious diversity, and service. My proposal is based off of a two week Catholic summer camp called Youth in Theology and Ministry (YTM).

### *YTM*

The idea for YTM was born in 1998 by Dr. Jeffery Kaster, professor of pastoral ministry at Saint John's University and School of Theology and Seminary, and Dr. William Cahoy, then dean of Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary. They wanted to create a program that would engage youth in theological education and provide a safe space to explore their vocation (where God was calling them) as well as a program that would foster leadership skills in future leaders in ministry. In 1999, the Lilly Endowment Grant accepted their proposal and in June 2000 the first YTM Summer Institute was held at Saint John's. Since then, 472 high school youth have participated in YTM, 107 College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University theology majors and minors or SOT graduate students have been YTM counselors, gaining essential pastoral skills in youth ministry, and over 100 adult mentors have received theological education through YTM.

YTM has five main goals:

1. To stimulate and nurture excitement about theological learning
2. To encourage young Christians to consider vocations in Christian ministry
3. To recruit a youth population to the YTM Summer Institute that represents the diversity of American Catholicism
4. To foster the development of pastoral ministry skills among the counselors and adult mentors
5. To become a laboratory for Catholic youth ministry and vocation research

High school is a critical period in young people's faith development. In the Catholic faith especially, this is the time when they go through confirmation and are given the responsibility of really claiming their faith for themselves. This can be an intimidating task and difficult to do without having a community to explore their faith with. In terms of faith development, finding roots during this period is crucial because in order for a person's faith to be sustained as they go on to college or move away from home and become completely responsible for practicing their faith, they need a foundation to stand on. Additionally, both receiving and providing mentorship is a key part of vocational discernment, especially in ministry. A person can learn everything there is to know about a subject or job, but whether or not it is something that truly speaks to their heart they can only discover by actually engaging with and working in it. Dr. Kaster and Dr. Cahoy were conscious of all these things and as a result YTM's goals focus on getting youth excited about theology, facilitating vocational discernment, and mentoring.

These same sentiments are expressed in YTM's four foundational principles:

1. Theological study
2. Service and justice
3. Vocational discernment (not strictly religious vocations)
4. Prayer

This set of foundational principles I believe is the genius of YTM. They represent what it means to truly engage in one's religion. Theological study gives people a foundation to base their beliefs off of and a place to go when they are struggling. Religious conviction varies over a lifetime, but a determining factor in whether we make it through the tough times with our faith intact is whether we understand our religion and why it has the practices, doctrine, and rituals it does. We may not always like the specific church, synagogue, mosque, temple, etc. we go to, but if we know the implicit reason for why we are there, we will continue to practice.

As IFYC has indicated, service is key for young people. They want to *do*, to make a difference and therefore integrating service experiences with theological experiences is essential in faith development. As is written in the New Testament, “faith without works is dead.”<sup>67</sup> Many of the teachings found in religions pertain to experiences here on earth and therefore faith cannot be separated from service.

Religion—as a response to the call from something beyond oneself—is very powerful. In this way I think it can be very beneficial to think about what people feel called to do in a religious context because it calls them to think about themselves and the world around them. As YTM’s motto says, YTM is about “discovering deep gladness for the world’s deep need.”<sup>68</sup>

Prayer is an essential part of faith development. It helps people establish a personal relationship with the divine. Prayer is often thought of as just talking silently to the divine, but there are numerous ways to pray. YTM exposes youth to a number of different Christian prayer forms such as taize, Stations of the Cross, Ignation contemplation, lexio divina, and centering prayer, with the goal of helping them discover what form of prayer speaks to them.

Finally, YTM has three overarching questions that, along with its goals and foundational principles, serve as the basis for its methodology:

1. What is your deep gladness?
2. How might you connect this to the world’s deep need?
3. How is God calling you?

As I mentioned above, YTM is about discovering where a person’s deep gladness meets the world’s deep need and it can be very beneficial to explore this within a religious context that asks you to think outside yourself.

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<sup>67</sup> James 2:20

<sup>68</sup> “About YTM,” YTM, accessed April 2016, <http://www.csbsju.edu/sot/ytm-youth-in-theology-and-ministry/about-ytm>

This phrase was originally coined by Fredrick Buechner in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*.

The camp itself is ideally a two summer commitment. During the Summer I Institute, youth participate in twenty hours of theological instruction, thirty hours of service learning (such as volunteering in a nursing home, day camp for Latino children, Boys and Girls Club, and the Saint Benedict Monastery's common garden), and twenty hours of prayer. In between Summer I and Summer II youth complete a service project—such as starting a youth group, creating a prayer garden, leading a confirmation retreat, or teaching dance and music to children—that they will present to different religious sites during their second summer. The layout for the Summer II Institute is essentially the same except that instead of spending thirty hours participating in service, youth spend the thirty hours in leadership development, vocational discernment, theological reflection and creating a presentation on their service project, and learning about Catholic social teaching.

So how does all of this translate in an interfaith setting? For the five goals, here is what I propose:

1. Stimulate and nurture excitement for theological learning about one's own and other religious traditions
2. Encourage youth to become interfaith leaders in their community and leaders in their religious community (not necessarily religious leaders)
3. Recruit a youth population that represents the religious diversity of America or the area where the camp is being held
4. Foster the development of leadership and mentoring skills of counselors and adult mentors
5. Be a laboratory interfaith research

I think the foundational principles can remain the same because they are all necessary in interfaith engagement. Prayer and vocational discernment get at the intrapersonal side of interfaith (Heschel and Eck). Theological study gets at inter- and intra-faith literacy, service and justice correspond directly to the service and justice interfaith uses as a way to bring people from

different religions together, and prayer and vocational discernment get at the intrapersonal side of interfaith that Heschel and Eck emphasize, and I think is often neglected in interfaith work.

The overarching questions, too, can remain the same, although I would change “How is God calling you?” to “How are you being called?” as some people may not necessarily believe in God or, as in Hinduism have a different understanding of God and gods. People can still say that those who do believe in God can think about the question in terms of how God is calling them.

The schedule would be very similar to the schedule for YTM. Youth will have a morning session with music, short prayer activity led by the Summer II youth, and a lecture from a theologian about a topic related to the theme of the camp. They will then attend a theology class that pertains to their own religion. Afterwards they will gather in small religiously diverse groups to teach the other members of the group about what they learned and discuss how it relates to their personal faith and interfaith work.

After lunch, Summer I youth will go with the group they are assigned to a service site, while the Summer II youth will have interfaith leadership training that includes discussion of social problems, reflection on how they view them from their own religious perspective and how interfaith can be used to help address social problems, teaches them how to lead interfaith dialogue, and a visit to an interfaith organization, and time to work on the presentation of the projects they completed between Summer I and Summer II.

The structure of the service project they do in between Summer I and Summer II will draw on the service ideas of IFYC and CYC. They will be encouraged to do their service projects from within their religious community, but it will not be a requirement. It can be interfaith or religion-specific focused, but they will be encouraged to include interfaith dialogue and if people from the same or different faiths live in the same area, they can work together.

The evening prayer service would include a prayer form from a different religion each night and be led by a counselor from that religion. The same counselor will also give a testimony about an experience they had that helped them grow in their faith. At the end of the night, youth will have what YTM calls “cabin time,” where they meet in small groups divided by gender and led by a counselor to reflect on the day. See Appendix C for a sample schedule of a typical day for Summer I and Summer II youth.

A question that remains is whether the program I am proposing would foster religious commitment. To analyze this, I think it is beneficial to look at some results from YTM. A survey conducted in 2007 with young adults who had completed YTM between 2000 and 2004<sup>69</sup> found that:

- 97% YTM stimulated and nurtured theological learning
- 74% YTM influenced them to pray more often
- 71% YTM influenced them to participate more often in community service
- 47% YTM had a significant positive influence on their leadership
- 46% YTM provided significant help in fostering serious reflection about vocation

Additionally, the table below details the effect YTM had on youth’s intrapersonal relationship with their religion.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Jeffrey Kaster, *Youth Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 32.

<sup>70</sup> Kaster, *Youth Ministry*, 34.



<b>YTM Pre-Post Test 2008-2014</b>		
	<b>Pre-Test</b>	<b>Post-Test</b>
	<i>Agree %</i>	<i>Agree %</i>
I have experienced a call to follow in the footsteps of Christ and his ways	50%	68%
I am considering theological study in college	22%	62%
I am considering priesthood or religious life	80%	89%
I am currently taking a leadership role in a specifically religious organization	46%	75%
	<i>Extremely Committed</i>	<i>Extremely Committed</i>
How committed are you to the Catholic Church	20%	35%
	<i>Extremely Important</i>	<i>Extremely Important</i>
How important or unimportant is religious faith in shaping your major life decisions?	38%	50%

One of the greatest impacts YTM had on youth according to both surveys was stimulating an interest in theological learning. I think this is essential because having an interest in theology leads people to learn about the foundations of their religion, and particular to YTM, to learn about the nature of the Trinity and Eucharist, why Mass is structured the way it is, and the significance and purpose of the sacraments. This in turn gives people a firm foundation for their commitment of what makes their religion unique and develop a greater appreciation for its ritual aspects and this in turn enables them to bring their full selves into interfaith dialogue without feeling threatened.

The second table provides evidence of this effect. It is clear from the data that participation in YTM not only increased religious commitment and fostered religious identity, but it did so in a lasting way. Many youth became leaders within their parish after YTM and there was a significant increase in youth who felt called to follow Christ and that their religious faith was extremely important in shaping their major life decisions.

I think the interfaith version of YTM I am proposing would have similar effects. It encourages youth to own their respective traditions by thinking critically about them in their theology classes and teaching other youth what they learned, as well as apply their respective religious principles during concrete service. As some of the alumni I interviewed commented, simply entering into dialogue about their beliefs increased their religious commitment. Learning how to talk about one's beliefs in a public space gives them a sense of comfort for who they are. This camp would give youth the safe space and discussion to help them develop this sense of comfort.

Additionally it helps achieve IFYC's goals by 1) encouraging interfaith cooperation by having youth from different religions participate in service projects together; 2) teaching interfaith leadership skills; and 3) having youth cultivate these skills by leading projects of their own creation. The dialogue sessions after youth take their theology classes foster interfaith literacy and an appreciation of other religions. It especially helps the counselors develop interfaith leadership skills as they are the ones who will lead the discussions, and facilitate insightful encounters, appreciation, and relationships among the youth.

## Conclusion

IFYC makes a valuable contribution to the interfaith movement in many ways. It garners interest in interfaith among college students, provides an example of how religion can be used constructively to improve society, encourages young people to be involved in interfaith work throughout their lives, and provides them with the skills and tools necessary for being interfaith leaders. IFYC is bringing interfaith awareness to campuses across America and opening the doors for interfaith conversations.

It is also necessary to note two other things. First, IFYC is continuing to evolve. I received multiple emails about new initiatives while writing this thesis, but at a certain point I had to write based on the information I had. For example, it has joined the Know Your Neighbor Initiative, a campaign run by a group of religious and interfaith organizations that seek to promote dialogue across America on religious diversity and general awareness of faith traditions. It has also added a new program called Common Knowledge Podcasts to help people improve their interfaith literacy, which IFYC defines as “knowledge necessary to be a leader in a religiously diverse world.”<sup>71</sup> These podcasts focus on different topics such as medicine and interfaith literacy, Islam and interfaith engagement, Hinduism in contemporary America, race, religion, and the conversation after Charleston, interfaith and art, and evangelical Christianity and the environment. All of these topics are important; we cannot separate our faith from real world issues and thus knowing how different religions relate to them is an inherent part of interfaith literacy. I think IFYC is lacking though when it comes to more formal interfaith literacy, which involves learning about the fundamental elements that define different religions.

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<sup>71</sup> “Common Knowledge: A Podcast About Interfaith Literacy,” IFYC, accessed April 2016, <https://www.ifyc.org/podcast>

IFYC should encourage the people they interview to reflect more on how the traditional aspects of their religion relate to the topic of the interview.

Second, 688 campuses in America used IFYC resources and 256 showed sustained commitment to interfaith cooperation in 2014.<sup>72</sup> With so many campuses involved, there are definitely some that do engage in the deeper dialogue I am advocating. My point here is that IFYC's structure and methodology does not intentionally promote deeper theological dialogue or personal faith development. It would be wrong to say these never happen, but I do not think they happen as often as they would have the potential to if IFYC put more emphasis on generating deeper conversation that integrates religious difference and shared values. As it stands, I consider IFYC as more of a multi-faith service organization than an interfaith organization. It brings youth from different religious traditions together—i.e., it organizes multi-faith groups—to cooperate in common causes, but its methodology does not sufficiently engage theology and the unique aspects of religious traditions enough to be aptly called an interfaith organization.

Many youth of today, even some involved in IFYC, are becoming disenchanted with institutional religion. As an organization that identifies as youth-focused and interfaith, I believe IFYC has the responsibility to encourage youth to explore their own faith within the context of learning about and cooperating with people from other religions. It cannot instill faith and religious commitment itself, but it can facilitate their development and enrichment. Youth are the future of religion and interfaith. They have the potential to create authentic coexistence among religions, but they need to preserve the distinctiveness of different religions to do so. There is no interfaith without different faiths. As Eck remarks:

The vigorous encounter of a pluralistic society is not premised on achieving agreement on matters of conscience and faith, but on achieving something far more valuable: the relationship of ongoing debate and discussion. *E Pluribus Unum*, “out of many, one,” envisions one people, a

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<sup>72</sup> Interfaith Youth Core, 2014 Annual Report, 7.

common sense of a civic “we,” but not one religion, one faith, or one conscience: *unum* does not mean uniformity. Perhaps the most valuable common bond people of many faiths have is their mutual commitment to a society based on the give and take of civil dialogue at a common table.<sup>73</sup>

Further, Heschel asserted, “No two human beings are alike. . . . Every human being has something to say, to think, or to do which is unprecedented.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, no two religions are alike. The diversity of religious traditions and our own religion’s traditional practices and beliefs enable us to encounter the transcendent reality that we often miss.

Should interfaith be used to create social capital? Yes. It is far too often seen in a negative light so we need to show how it can be used to improve the world. Interfaith needs to be about more than service, though, because religion is more than service. “Religion is not merely a belief in an ultimate reality or in an ultimate ideal. . . . Religion is a momentous possibility, the possibility namely that what is highest in spirit is also deepest in nature—that there is something at the heart of nature, something akin to us, a conserver and increaser of values . . . that the things that matter most are not at the mercy of the things that matter least.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Diana Eck, “From Diversity to Pluralism,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, <http://pluralism.org/encounter/todays-challenges/from-diversity-to-pluralism/>

<sup>74</sup> Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 37.

<sup>75</sup> Chaim Stern, ed., *The New Union Prayer Book for Synagogue and Home: Weekdays, Sabbaths, and Festivals* (New York: CCAR Press, 1975), 9.

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## Appendix A: Alumni Responses

### Respondent 1

**1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?**

I was primarily a part of local interfaith efforts on my college campus - planning a yearly interfaith celebration for orientation week, serving on the interfaith task group on our Campus Ministry Team. In 2008, I had the opportunity to attend one of IFYC's very first conference - before the Interfaith Leadership Institutes and Better Together programs developed. The conference was my first *true* exposure to interfaith work outside of my tiny, homogenous campus in Mississippi! I was able to interact with people other than the one Jewish girl in my sorority, or the Muslim in my religious studies class or my Hindu neighbor. I gained a whole new perspective on my religious identity and the self-understanding of religious identities within other traditions.

My current involvement in interfaith dialogue recreates this. I coordinate and facilitate the Inter-Religious Council at Emory University while I'm getting my Master of Divinity degree there. My main goal in facilitating dialogue among our students isn't necessarily to do a service project together or to find points that we all agree on, but my goal is to ask questions that help them reflect and articulate their understanding of their religious identity while understanding the religious identity of their friends around the table.

**2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?**

YES. 100%. Here's why: I was involved in interfaith work in college and was a religious studies major. I came to college very rooted in my Christian identity and very unwilling to relinquish that identity. However, it became significantly more "watered down" if you will as I learned about other religious traditions - and I started to really value their practices and world views. I became one of those "I'm cool with everything - I'm all the religions!" kind of person.

Then, when I attended the IFYC conference in 2008, I was surrounded by people who were deeply, deeply committed to their religious traditions. I listened to them articulate what was valuable to them about the Jewish tradition, or why their Muslim faith inspired them to show grace and compassion to others, or how Buddhism was meaningful to them personally. All the while, they were *also* able to articulate why this meant they could be involved in interfaith work. Every time it came to my turn to speak, I had no idea what to say! What *was* it about Christianity that I liked? What about my tradition was meaningful to me in my life? What am I rooted in without realizing it? And what does Christianity say about interfaith work? Interfaith work encouraged me to seek out those answers, and as a result I became a stronger, more committed Christian because I found what I valued in my tradition. I think this experience is a big part of the reason why I decided to go to theology school: I wanted to understand better how my world

view and circumstances informed my own theology, but also how someone totally different than me is informed by a much different set of circumstances as they formulate their own theology.

So much of interfaith work requires one to bring one's full religious identity to the table. I think it is so, so important to have a strong religious identity both in life and in interfaith work. But more so, I think it's important to have an *authentic* religious identity. Just because I represent the Christian tradition at the interfaith table doesn't mean I have to represent Christianity perfectly every time. I have to be vulnerable in sharing my extreme doubts. I find that I feel more comfortable sharing my failings as a Christian with people from other traditions than I do sharing them with other Christians. (I'm not afraid to share with my Jewish and Muslim friends that I'm not sure about the whole "Jesus is divine" thing because they aren't so sure of that either!) We can probably think that a "strong religious identity" means deeply committed to one's tradition, but I'd like to think that I challenge the students I work with to have an authentic religious identity, full of doubts and questions and confusion and hope and assuredness and logic and all of the complex things that have an effect on people of faith.

### **3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

Ah, how these things fluctuate. Currently I am only tangentially involved in my religious tradition. Yes, I am in seminary - but I don't practice Christianity like I used to. I think studying theology (as you may know!) and especially being involved in interfaith work leaves a lot of space for ideological gray area: everything is subjective, there is no universal truth etc. etc. In terms of my religious identity, this is the biggest struggle I've had. I would describe my religious identity as a connection to tradition. So, for example: while I may not believe everything doctrinally and theologically that Christians believe, I still call myself a Christian. I may not believe that Jesus was truly divine, or that he was resurrected, or any of the things I am *supposed* to believe, but I derive meaning from it because it is important to my tradition. I am a Christian because my value system is based on Christianity, as are my principles, my world view, my rootedness. But many would say I am not a Christian because I wouldn't stand in front of a congregation and confess Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I think this is all to say, I value tradition over belief in claiming Christianity as my religious identity. Does that make sense?

### **4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

I was - I mentioned previously that I came to college very rooted in my Christian identity. I spent high school learning and growing and investing in my work at church, with my youth group, and Christian conferences, leading delegations etc. etc. I had a fundamentalist stage when I attended a friend's church and was very involved with her community up until the time I left for college. When I got to college, I remember thinking at the first interfaith celebration service I attended "this is so ridiculous. We should not be leaving room for other faith traditions here, this is wrong." A year later, after exposure to IFYC, I was helping to plan that service.

**5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

Definitely - as I mentioned before, it made me have questions about my own religious identity that I had never considered. By getting to know people of other faith traditions, I was forced into self exploration so that I could actually contribute to the conversations happening around me!

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

I think that IFYC excels in all of these areas, though I think improvement can be made to engage real differences. A lot of interfaith work can become sort of kum-bah-ya where everyone sits around talking about how much we have in common, but in reality our differences outnumber our commonalities.

While this isn't necessarily in IFYC's wheelhouse, I think there is a need for all four of IFYC's main goals in other areas of social, religious and political division. The partisanship found in churches, government, and communities could really benefit from understanding through dialogue, encounter of commitments and learning from others, active seeking and questioning. There are such thick lines of difference all around us that no one is willing to cross. IFYC could really raise the stakes if they were to more explicitly equip college students to engage people on the other side in every aspect of their lives.

**7. Studies show that there is a continuous downward trend in religiosity, especially regarding affiliation and the institutional modes of religious identity such as worship attendance and participation in religious rituals and traditions. Do you think this is problematic? What implications does it have for IFYC and interfaith work in general?**

I do think it's problematic while also recognizing that I am part of the problem. I think what I wrote about my religious identity previously is a big part of it: people aren't willing to be theologically or doctrinally bound to a particular religious tradition, though they adopt the implicit values of tradition without realizing it. I worry that the implications for interfaith work is the "watered down" religiosity that I mentioned earlier where people want to have their religion *a la carte*. But I also think there is a huge opportunity for IFYC and for people working in the

interfaith sphere to change religion's bad reputation. I think that's the key: showing how "being religious" is valuable rather than detrimental to one's life.

**8. What role have the institutional modes of religious identity (worship attendance, participation in religious rituals and traditions, your religion's beliefs etc.) played in your life and interfaith work? Did your involvement in IFYC effect your participation in them or thoughts about them? If so, how?**

For many, many years, I've tried to find an organic way to bridge my participation in Christianity with my participation in interfaith work without much success. In my experience, many congregations treat interfaith work as something to do on the side, and not something that warrants full attention in our lives as Christians. I've been able to combine the two in my fellowship in the Office of Interfaith Relations for the Presbyterian Church (USA) as I write curriculum for churches to use to better engage persons of other faith in their communities. On the other side, the committee responsible for ordaining me would not accept my work in an inter religious context to satisfy my internship requirement. So, I often find the two aren't compatible.

**9. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

I don't think so - all my thoughts are gone! I hope I didn't overwhelm you with my answers. I'm very interested to hear how your thesis turns out and I'm more than happy to clarify if you have any further questions!

## Respondent 2

### 1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?.

I have attended IFYC's ILI (Atlanta, 2014) and was involved with Better Together on my campus, University of North Florida (UNF), for both of my years of attendance there. In my second year (2013-2014), I served as Vice-President of Outreach & Hospitality for Better Together. I also served both years on the Executive Planning Committees for Interfaith Week, which is an annual event at UNF that takes place during the spring and focuses on promoting interfaith efforts and the importance of interfaith cooperation both on campus, locally, nationally, and internationally. Some of the events we hosted that I specifically helped to plan and lead include a documentary viewing of *For the Bible Tells Me So* (co-hosted with the UNF LGBTQ Resource Center) which was followed by a panel discussion with LGBTQ-identified religious leaders in the area; a Wear-a-Turban Day, during which we partnered with the local Sikh community to have Sikh men on campus wrapping turbans for students and faculty and providing information about the Sikh faith and community; and a documentary viewing of *Divided We Fall*, a film made by Valarie Kaur which is about the violence perpetuated against Sikhs in the aftermath of 9/11. (Both documentary viewings were open to the general public.) Additionally, I was a speaker at a student panel Interfaith Week event which focused on intersecting identities; I spoke about my queer and Muslim identities as well as my past as a Christian and atheist.

Being involved in events and programs like these taught me the incredible importance of pluralism and the profound impact that interfaith cooperation and activism has. When I first joined Better Together, I was merely interested in the educational aspects of world religions and how people lived their faith differently. I was also an atheist. Through my involvement with IFYC and Better Together, I was introduced and later converted to Islam. I think that this particular experience has caused me to constantly be very aware of how the larger interfaith movement treats those with secular identities. I currently attend Claremont School of Theology for the MA program in Interreligious Studies and I am often the one student bringing to the table the inclusion of atheists, agnostics, and other secularly-identified people in interfaith cooperation and activism. It's an important issue to me because it's personal: if I had felt unwelcome as an atheist in IFYC programs and my campus' Better Together, then I absolutely would not be who I am today. I would not be Muslim, I would not be interested in interfaith work, I certainly would not be a seminary student. Although I also make a conscious effort to make sure the larger interfaith movement is intentionally inclusive of non-Abrahamic, non-Western, and indigenous faiths and traditions, I find that I have to bring up those less often than I do secular frameworks.

### 2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?

I suppose ideally the answer, in terms of speaking generally and not specifically about interfaith work, would be yes. However, again I feel that I must refer back to both my own experiences as

an atheist in the interfaith movement when I first got involved and the experiences of my many atheist and agnostic friends who do interfaith work as well. To me, having a strong religious identity is not that important at all to interfaith work. In the inaugural year of UNF's Better Together, the majority of students involved - both heavily and vaguely - held secular identities; it was still an extremely active club and every one of us were passionate about interfaith activism. While it's possible to use terminology like "ideological framework" instead of "religion" (our Better Together club was particularly fond of this phrasing as it was inherently more inclusive to both those with secular identities and those who were searching for what they wanted their religious/secular identity to be), I think most atheists/agnostics/etc. would take issue with their identities being regarded as "religious." But I think even saying that whatever your identity may be, secular or religious, it should be strong in order to do interfaith work - even saying that sounds wrong to me. People's identities shift and change all the time, but especially when they're young, so particularly for young adults involved in interfaith work who may be seeking something - be it validation for the tradition in which they grew up, or a new religious or secular identity that fits them better, or even if they don't realize they're looking for something, which was my experience as far as coming into this field as an atheist from a Christian background and then converting to Islam - to say that you should be strong in whatever your identity is seems limiting.

**3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

I identify as a Muslim, specifically a Quranist (meaning that, for me, the Qur'an is the sole authority in Islam, as it is the direct word of Allah, and reject the authority of the Hadith), rather than a Sunni or Shia or another sect. I try to pray regularly and read Qur'an. However, I don't participate a lot in the community aspect of things, such as going to mosque. I'm considerably liberal, have tattoos (which I kept getting even after I converted, though tattoos are generally considered haram - or forbidden - in Islam), identify as queer, and my style of hijab shows my bangs. In general, I have not felt entirely comfortable at mosques before during Friday prayers with the whole large community. I will sometimes go alone though during the day when there are only a few people for daytime prayers. Otherwise, my faith and practices are pretty private and personal.

**4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

I was not Muslim prior to my involvement with IFYC, but I grew up in a Christian family and attended church and Christian school until graduating high school. I became an atheist during my first year of college for a variety of reasons and was not incredibly involved with any atheist community either.

**5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

Aside from the fact that my participation in IFYC led to me becoming Muslim at all, I certainly think that my faith since converting has been strengthened by my participation in IFYC and what

I've learned through that. It's extremely affirming to learn the similarities, differences, and connections between my own faith and that of others, even (perhaps especially) outside of the Abrahamic traditions. Also, after a childhood and adolescence of very exclusionary Christianity, it's incredibly liberating and strengthening to be able to have a dialogue with those of different backgrounds and faiths and be able to peacefully disagree while still supporting one another.

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

In my experience, IFYC excels in A, B, C, and most of D. I believe some improvement could be made in the realm of "real differences" under D, particularly when speaking about the topic of race and racism, which is often connected throughout society to religion. For example, most people in the U.S. probably assume that anyone with brown skin is Muslim and act on that assumption, whether negatively or positively, when that person could be Hindu, Sikh, or any other religious or secular identity. I understand that it is a difficult topic that involves a lot of careful speaking, unpacking privileges and that sort of tough thing that certain people might not be ready for, but in my opinion, we cannot promote religious pluralism while ignoring racial elements.

**7. Studies show that there is a continuous downward trend in religiosity, especially regarding affiliation and the institutional modes of religious identity such as worship attendance and participation in religious rituals and traditions. Do you think this is problematic? What implications does it have for IFYC and interfaith work in general?**

I don't think this trend is problematic. I'm not entirely against institutionalized aspects of religion, but I think it's important for young people to be able to decide what those rituals and traditions mean for them. If people come to believe that their faith practices are more meaningful to them when private or personal, then they should not feel obligated to participate in the traditional institutionalized modes of their religion if it does not fulfill them. I think this trend will challenge and ultimately benefit the interfaith movement because it will require an even more nuanced view of these faiths and what it means to be religious at all.

**8. What role have the institutional modes of religious identity (worship attendance, participation in religious rituals and traditions, your religion's beliefs etc.) played in your life and interfaith work? Did your involvement in IFYC effect your participation in them or thoughts about them? If so, how?**

Institutional modes of religion played a huge part of my life growing up in a Christian household, attending Christian school and going to church. However, as a Muslim, besides

prayers and times such as Ramadan, Eid al-Adha, and Eid al-Fitr, I don't particularly incorporate the institutionalized aspects of Islam (going to mosque, etc.) into my life.

**9. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

Not that I can think of. If you have more questions or need clarification for any of my answers, please let me know!



## **Respondent 3**

### **1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?**

I attended an ILI in Chicago in my junior year at Wake Forest University, 3 years ago. I was the president of Wake Forest University's Interfaith Council and our Better Together campaign was our Semesterly Interfaith Dinner. We would hold a dinner at various religious places of worship (i.e. Mosque, Church, Synagogue), invite 3 religious leaders from Islam, Christianity, and Judaism to be on a panel, and we would dialogue about the power of sharing tables and communal dining.

I was taught by the IFYC that Diana Eck defines pluralism as you listed it below. I like to think of it as Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship. They contributed to my current involvement in interfaith dialogue by allowing a safe space to meet the other. From an academic statement, comparative religion is my passion. I plan on making a career in these fields.

### **2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?**

I do not think it is important to have a strong religious identity; however, it is important to have a strong identity in your faith. It is interfaith, not interreligious. Personally, I do not affiliate with institutionalized/organized religion; I tend to stray away from categorization. There is a great anonymous quote: "You don't need religion to have morals. If you cannot tell right from wrong, than you lack empathy, not religion."

Again, as Buber discusses, it is more important to have a strong commitment to what it is you are committed to. I do not think it is of importance where that commitment originates. Ultimately, I believe interfaith is about non-verbal communication. Balancing the mind, heart, and body, coming together to change what it is you deem needs to be changed.

### **3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

If by religious identity you mean affiliation, I am not affiliated with any religion. If by religious identity you mean the way my beliefs affect my every day lifestyle, then they dictate how I live. I do believe in some sort of higher power, regardless of the name or description, and I live my life with gratitude.

I wake up each morning, say the Modeh Ani (Jewish morning prayer), write down 10 things I am grateful for, workout, and lead my day. I do read the Jewish and Christian Bible, nearly daily. As mentioned, I do not like feeling categorized and if I am a part of "this," then I have to do "that." I participate in many Christian, Jewish, Muslim holidays, fast on their fast days, and feel as if by

participating with the other, I get to know myself and my identity is, therefore, forever forming and re-forming, just as life is.

**4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

This response is difficult. The answer is partly. I was inspired to lead this path of bridge building when engaging in my story with Eboo Patel. I was fortunate to have lunch with him during his visit to Wake Forest University. I was raised Roman Catholic, studied under a Chabad rabbi to convert to orthodox Judaism, and now have dedicated my life to the study of finding myself in the other.

**5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

My commitment to serve the other was strengthened by my involvement in IfYC because I saw other people my age engaging in this work. It motivated me to continue striving for plurality and inclusive relations because, in my opinion, meeting others is truly what life is about. From a place of sincerity, I urge you to ponder times when you have felt most worthy: I would assume it has been when you have selfless acted for someone else.

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism, which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

I truly believe that IFYC excels in them all. My only suggestion would be to continue doing this work abroad. I really do not have any criticism in my time working with IFYC.

**7. Studies show that there is a continuous downward trend in religiosity, especially regarding affiliation and the institutional modes of religious identity such as worship attendance and participation in religious rituals and traditions. Do you think this is problematic? What implications does it have for IFYC and interfaith work in general?**

It is definitely problematic for the continuation of the religious institution. As a person that does not believe in the institution, I am indifferent on the issue. I believe the world needs to accept and participate in some sort of worldly type of fellowship. Utopian and unrealistic? Yes. Most likely will never happen? Probably.

I do not think it will have a terribly affect on IFYC and interfaith work in general. From my experience, most of the participants in my ILI were not what we would define as strictly or observantly “religious” i.e. going to services every week, observing laws, dietary laws, etc. I believe that most participants were (obviously) born and raised in a certain institution, choose to stay in it because it is familiar and what their family has believed in, but then decide to go into interfaith work because there is some-sort of understanding that they could have been born into the circumstance of the other.

**8. What role have the institutional modes of religious identity (worship attendance, participation in religious rituals and traditions, your religion's beliefs etc.) played in your life and interfaith work? Did your involvement in IFYC effect your participation in them or thoughts about them? If so, how?**

IFYC did not effect my participation in them or thoughts about them. As briefly mentioned above, I was raised Roman Catholic, was confirmed, and when I went to college, stopped attending Mass. I began to hang out in the Hillel room because I had some Jewish friends, and then started to learn and then study Judaism. I began to fall in love.

I studied under a Chabad rabbi for nearly 8 months with the intentions of converting to Orthodox Judaism. Once learning Judaism, I felt as if I started to understand Jesus of Nazareth from his own beliefs and perspectives. That was really the catalyst of studying other religions, to learn about other people.

Ultimately, I did not convert because I came to realize how, while rituals, services, and institutions are important and good for some, it is not for me. If I ultimately was forced to declare a religious/faith belief, I would not. But if tried again, I suppose I would consider myself Agnostic; I simply don't know.

I received a B.A from Wake Forest University in religion and also minored in Philosophy and Middle East and South Asian Studies. I lived in Israel for the year after where I received an M.A. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Nonprofit Management, while also interning at the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. I then moved to Germany for nearly a year to study the language, since much of my Ph.D. research will be on Martin Buber, Rudolf Steiner, and many other German speakers. I will begin in September a Graduate Certificate in Interfaith Dialogue from Hartford Seminary where I received a Peacemaking Fellowship.

**9. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

“One hundred years ago, the great African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois famously said, ‘The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.’ I believe that the twenty-first century will be shaped by the questions of the faith line” (XV). In his book *Acts of Faith*, Eboo Patel believes the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be shaped by the faith-line. Much of my work has been on Patel and I believe this statement. We simply do not have the ignorant luxury of deliberately avoiding the other. It is estimated by 2038 that there will be 9 billion people on this planet.

I mentioned this because in addition to becoming a professor, with a Ph.D. in Sociology, namely how the “greening” of religion affects not only the environment, but also human relationships; I also intend to found a nonprofit called the “Interfaith Environmental Community” outside of Berlin. This will be a community dedicated to living sustainable lives in order to exemplify how people of different faiths can come together and work towards the preservation and continuation of interfaith dialogue and the world. It will serve as a microcosm to express to the world how we need to act together for the continuation and sustainment of the world.

## Respondent 4

### 1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?

I became involved in interfaith work at the tail end of my sophomore year at the University of Illinois (August 2009- May 2010). Like most universities who have similar programs, U of I has a “One Book One Campus” campaign that runs throughout the academic year. This campaign is centered around a book selected by university administrators, and includes events and discussions that culminate in a visit from the book’s author. The “One Book” for that year was Eboo Patel’s *Acts of Faith*. Thus interfaith cooperation was very much “in the air” that year.

Along with Eboo’s appearance on campus, there was also a major student-led interfaith service event called “Million Meals for Haiti,” which partnered with the various religious community organizations and the Salvation Army to package over 1,000,000 meals to send to the earthquake victims in Haiti. It was so large that it took place in Assembly Hall, U of I’s massive basketball arena.

One of my closest friends was at this time on the exec. board of Interfaith in Action, U of I’s student-run interfaith organization that coordinated the Million Meals event, and she roped me in to helping do some of the fundraising. I thought to myself *Any organization that can bring together hundreds of people from all sorts of backgrounds to package over a million meals to send to earthquake victims through a partnership with the Salvation Army— THAT is an organization I have to be a part of.* Those sorts of projects just weren’t happening amongst the Christian organizations on campus. In fact, the Christian orgs (I actually held a leadership position in one of them) rarely even spoke to each other save for an annual “All Campus Worship” event. No projects on that scale with that degree of community-building.

Despite my limited participation with the organization, my Interfaith in Action friend nominated me (at a meeting I didn’t attend, I might add) to succeed her on the exec board. I was elected. Thus I found myself having to jump right in at the start of my junior year (fall of 2010). I was one of two students from Interfaith in Action chosen to attend the first-ever ILI in DC in October of 2010. That experience changed my life. It was there, if my memory serves me correctly, that IFYC launched the concept of the Better Together Campaigns. After that, I served on exec board as Religious Literacy Chair until my graduation in 2012. During 2011, I launched the site [FaithLineProtestants.org](http://FaithLineProtestants.org) with friend and fellow Interfaith in Action board member Greg Damhorst.

These experiences taught me the power of interfaith cooperation to bring about social change. It also taught me the real need for robust interfaith efforts within a culture that seems bent on polarization instead of cooperation. The model of sociological pluralism advocated by IFYC seemed to me a very effective one that I could take with me into my life as a minister in the Episcopal Church.

**2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?**

Hm. This question is a difficult one. I believe that if you have some kind of religious identity, it not be merely a nominal one. So, for instance, if I claim to be Roman Catholic, I believe that I should know how the Roman Catholic tradition informs me and the decisions that I make. I don't have to know everything there is to know about Roman Catholicism to claim ownership of that group as my own, but I think its important that I be able to articulate why being Roman Catholic matters to me. That way, I am approaching

**3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

I am, broadly speaking, Episcopalian. (I am an Episcopal Priest, serving a congregation in Central FL.) Yet my Twitter bio defines me as an “Anglo-Catholic-Bapti-palian”— a nod to the multiple layers of identity I carry around as a part of my religious background. I grew up a committed Southern Baptist in Nashville, TN, a city that some have labeled as the “buckle of the Bible belt” and “the Protestant Vatican.” Parts of my Baptist upbringing growing up in that kind of environment still have a profound impact on me. In college, however, I began to yield to a more sacramental or liturgical impulse within me. This exploration of other aspects of the Christian tradition eventually led me to the Episcopal Church, where I located myself theologically along the spectrum of Anglo-Catholicism, or “Anglicans who lean more toward Rome than Geneva” (to put it in cheesy seminary terms). I participate in my tradition by serving as a member of the clergy preaching, teaching, and administering the sacraments. I also really like gin, so there's that.

**4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

Interestingly, my involvement with IFYC (and interfaith work more generally) coincided with my finding the Episcopal Church as my spiritual home. Before that, I'd been drifting around from denomination to denomination after distancing myself from the SBC— I was United Methodist for a little while, attended a progressive evangelical church for a short time, attended two different kinds of Lutheran churches, contemplated becoming Presbyterian for a sec, and then finally attended Mass at the Roman Catholic student center on campus before making my way to the Episcopal Church. I think it was this spirit of exploration and discovery that fueled my interest in other religious traditions outside the Christian faith.

**5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

I definitely feel my religious identity was strengthened by my involvement in IFYC programs. For one, the questions posed in interfaith dialogues stimulated my own curiosity and desire to articulate my own responses regarding different parts of my own tradition and beliefs. For

another, IFYC gave me ways to live out tenets I consider rather fundamental to my own faith tradition— principally, the tenet to love and serve others— that I might not have otherwise had.

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism, which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

In my experience, IFYC excels in bringing people of diverse religious persuasions together in ways that do not seem threatening or off-putting, and that allow all parties to maintain their own tradition's integrity. IFYC allows individuals to come together not in spite of their differences, but because of them. I find this vision very compelling.

I did experience some trouble including those more conservative than myself in interfaith work. Christians of a more conservative evangelical bent were reluctant to participate in interfaith service or dialogue events (which was part of what birthed [faithlineprotestants.org](http://faithlineprotestants.org)). I noticed that, at times, things ran the risk of becoming an echo chamber— people of diverse religious affiliations but sharing similar politics and social aspirations. Yet I don't think this challenge is unique to IFYC; any organization can struggle with this. To IFYC's credit, I've found them always to be conscientious about these challenges, and intentional about encouraging real diversity within their programs.

**7. Studies show that there is a continuous downward trend in religiosity, especially regarding affiliation and the institutional modes of religious identity such as worship attendance and participation in religious rituals and traditions. Do you think this is problematic? What implications does it have for IFYC and interfaith work in general?**

From an institutional standpoint as a minister, I would like to see the Church grow and thrive here in the US. That said, I do not see declining religious affiliation as a necessarily troubling phenomenon, nor do I really see it as affecting IFYC's existence. Religious affiliation is only declining in the industrialized West. Globally speaking, religious difference still remains a very vital concern. Thus organizations like IFYC will continue to find a place for the foreseeable future. I think it will be interesting to see what sort of structures begin to emerge as religious institutions lose their cultural influence and communities lose the services they provide.

**8. What role have the institutional modes of religious identity (worship attendance, participation in religious rituals and traditions, your religion's beliefs etc.) played in your life and interfaith work? Did your involvement in IFYC effect your participation in them or thoughts about them? If so, how?**

The Episcopal Church is a denomination that follows a liturgical calendar (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Easter, etc., etc.) that grounds our worship life. These have played a big role in my life and in my interfaith work. For instance, whenever I am asked what motivates me to serve, I think of the witness of Jesus washing his disciples' feet before the Last Supper that we commemorate every year on Maundy Thursday.

**9. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

I have nothing else to add—I think I've said a lot already! This got real long real quick. Sorry about that. I hope these answers help you in your thesis project!



## Respondent 5

### **1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?**

I was a Better Together organizer/leader of student group during my junior year of college, a Better Together Coach my senior year, and now I find myself an IFYC Staff member 3 years later.

The main thing that these experiences have taught me about pluralism is that it's long, hard work built on relationships. Without building relationships, nothing will get done. I learned very quickly that people weren't going to show up to events I created immediately willing to talk about religious and philosophical beliefs, let alone those beliefs that were personal to them. We have been socialized to consider discussing religion taboo, and we're arguing for (and doing) the opposite. A lot of trust must be established before taking on interfaith work with anyone, and this type of trust can only come from authentic relationships.

### **2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?**

As someone who identifies as fairly devout in her Catholic faith, yes—I think a strong religious identity is important. I think religion provides a framework, anchor and community through which we can ask life's most challenging questions and get through life's most challenging experiences. As with many religious people, my religiosity and spirituality ebbs and flows. Time and again, though, I realize that I am much better off in periods of strength. I don't think that's a coincidence. I think we're relational being prone to existential crises if left to our own devices, and religion provides a space to process the human condition and our particular human experiences in a way that no other social structure has. Do I acknowledge that it is a social structure at the end of the day? Absolutely. Do I understand that this makes it vulnerable to power dynamics that might compel some people to leave? Certainly. Do I think living in a postmodern era makes it particularly difficult to find resonance with tradition, particularly of a religious nature? You betcha. Have I personally considered leaving the Catholic Church? YES. Is any of this enough to devalue the institution of religion and the values that come with the pulse of these types of communities as a whole? At the end of the day, I have to stay. It would be too sad to go.

I would say something similar of secular folks, too, which is why I love the work that Chris Stedman is doing in his chaplaincy at Yale. Whether you believe in God or not, it's important to have a space to process when tragedy strikes or a place to share community on a joyous occasion. To me, that's a human need that has historically and still typically comes from religion.

The fact that people are bowing out is sad, though I get it—and I'm happy that secular folks are seeing the need and addressing it.

I don't think a strong religious identity is imperative to interfaith work. I think a strong sense of how one orients around religion is incredibly helpful, though. I know this is a nuanced distinction, but it's an important one. If I'm more rooted in my Catholicism, that doesn't necessarily make me a better interfaith leader. However, if I have an acute understanding of the role religion plays in my life and in my community at large—be it on campus, the city in which I live, or the world—I will be a far better interfaith leader. I would never say that someone can't be an impeccable interfaith leader without a deep personal commitment to religion, but I wouldn't hesitate to say that someone can only be a subpar interfaith leader at best if they're unable to articulate their relationship to the undeniable and inevitable role that religion plays in society—be it for better or worse.

### **3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

I would consider myself devout. I have quite a complex relationship with my Catholicism, though. So much of Catholic theology resonates deeply with me, and many Catholics throughout history give me a sense of pride in my faith (saints, mystics, early Church mothers and fathers, etc.). I love being part of a rich tradition. Since I'm such a theology nerd, though, sometimes my academic pursuit of God can be a roadblock to a spiritual relationship with God.

As far as how I participate in my religious tradition, it's tough to say. I have a deep desire to share my faith in community, but I am upset with the Church as institution. As a layperson, I don't feel supported by the Church. I feel I'm expected to "obey and submit" as Vatican II puts it, rather than live deeply in the questions and pursue them with rigor. What's more, it's hard to feel like your true calling is to the priesthood but for the option to be inherently unavailable to you as a result of your God-given womanhood. All this considered, it's very hard for me to go to Mass. Sometimes I go, sometimes I don't—but I'm always thinking about why that is. I also think service is a way that I practice my faith that feels a bit more authentic to me. I think to myself: "What is communion really about the Emmaus walk and not the Last Supper? What if Eucharist is the presence of Christ that appears when strangers walk together?" Then I remember the Vatican would hate that, and I'm confused all over again.

I'm not even sure if I adequately answered your question—it's a doozy! Ha.

### **4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

Yes!

**5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

Not necessarily. Like I said before, the strength of my religious identity doesn't directly correlate to my involvement with IFYC. To me, the Catholic Church and IFYC are two very different things—and as such I get different things from them. I strengthen my faith primarily through my involvement in the church, and I hone my interfaith leadership and help others do the same through my job at IFYC. If anything, my Catholicism has strengthened my interfaith leadership as opposed to the other way around. To be Catholic interested in pluralism means that I'll have to come up with a theology of interfaith cooperation—this is just good practice when dealing with the comingling of exclusive truth claims and finding value in engaging religious diversity at the same time. So I definitely have developed a Catholic theology of interfaith cooperation for myself.

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism, which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

*Quick question: Where did you find this articulation of IFYC's main goals? Is this your own interpretation? I've just never seen it defined in this way, especially the "d" bullet point. We tend to double down on interfaith action rather than dialogue. Our definition of pluralism is found [here](#). That said, I'll base my answer off of the language we typically use.*

We excel in the realm of building mutually-inspiring relationships with people of different backgrounds, and I think we can improve the piece about common action for the common good. To speak to the former, the ILI and Better Together network in and of themselves do a fantastic job of creating space where folks can interact meaningfully and productively across lines of difference. At the risk of sounding cheesy, it's actually a magical thing to see—particularly at the ILI. The participants know each other all of about one house before they plunge into deep conversation regarding difference with one another, and they build tremendous relationship as a result. To speak to the latter, sometimes I think common action for the common good is difficult to adequately address because a) common good is harder to define than meets the eye, and b) interfaith can feel like a social cause in and of itself, so it can feel difficult to seamlessly address another "common good" issue. As an IFYC staff person, I can say that our intention is for folks to address a social action issue *through an interfaith lens* as means to create spaces where people of diverse backgrounds will show up to then engage their diversity to positive ends. However, the former student organizer in me understands that this feels a lot different when practically

applied to campus. That's an area I'm particularly interested in thinking through within my own position at IFYC.

**7. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

Phew! I think that covers it! Thank you so much for asking me to do this—I found it helpful for me to sit down and articulate my responses to these questions, and it has provided some clarity that I didn't even realize I needed. I appreciate it and can't wait to see how the fruits of your research will unfold!

## Respondent 6

### **1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?**

I am an alumna of IFYC programs and in my current position work with IFYC on various projects for the campus I work for. In my undergraduate, I was founding President of my college's Interfaith Council. There, we had an on-campus training with IFYC staff and then I later attended an ILI. Within the year after I finished my undergrad, there was an IFYC Alumni Gathering in Atlanta that I attended. I have also spoken on Alumni Panels for IFYC twice, and am currently on the Speaker's Bureau. As a staff member at a university working for an interfaith institute now, I have also attended an IFYC ILI for the Ally Track, and work closely with IFYC staff to implement projects on our campus. Both in my undergrad and now at the university I work for, student leadership efforts have been closely linked to Better Together, and BT Day is always celebrated.

IFYC and Eboo Patel taught me Diana Eck's definition of pluralism: where diversity is a fact, pluralism is engagement with that fact. This, along with other concepts like interfaith cooperation, moving from dialogue to action, and the triangles of interfaith leadership formed the foundation of my understanding of interfaith work. I credit IFYC for providing me with the tools, language, and relationships necessary for me to expand my interfaith leadership.

### **2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?**

Before engaging in interfaith work, I did not find it important or necessary to have a clear religious / non-religious identity. As someone who was raised vaguely Christian and has been non-religious for years, I floated between identity groups easily because I was not expected to hold onto one. Once I entered into interfaith dialogues, I needed to figure out "where my roots are," as many interfaith activists say. This has caused me to think deeply about what my beliefs and values are, as well as what traditions, community, and narrative I would like to be a part of.

I do not think a person has to have a strong religious or non-religious identity in order to engage in interfaith work. I have found dialogue across difference to be an enriching and fascinating way for me to dig deeper into my own religiosity. I still do not have a strong identity in one tradition, but I feel that my contributions to dialogue are just as rich as anyone else's.

(I could ramble for a while! Let me know if you want me to expand/clarify.)

**3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

Quick answer: It's complicated. :)

Real answer: I am currently non-affiliated with any religious/non-religious tradition. In other words, I'm a "none"! I was raised Catholic, identified as a strict atheist for almost 10 years, and now would say that I find most inspiration in secular humanism, Catholicism, and Eastern traditions. I participate in religious traditions primarily intellectually and spiritually. My involvement in faith communities locally include attending lectures on Catholic social justice teaching, meditation with various groups, and participating in the community-wide interfaith services.

**4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

I was not involved with religious community before doing interfaith work. Interfaith dialogue and service events exposed me to the beauty of various traditions that I have since explored.

**5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

Definitely. Simply by being in dialogue about one's own beliefs/values, and listening to others' beliefs/values, is a clarifying and enlightening experience. It causes you to dig deeper into something that you may have ignored for years, but more than that, you do so with a lens toward understanding a shared humanity despite different beliefs.

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism, which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

IFYC excels in most all aspects of pluralism, especially dialogue that reveals common understandings while engaging real differences. IFYC very effectively teaches that it is okay to have difference and to disagree, but we still must understand one another authentically and openly.

Encountering exclusive religious / truth claims and commitments in interfaith dialogue is something that all interfaith organizations are working on, and IFYC seems to be no exception. IFYC seems to be working hard to not be an echo-chamber of liberal perspectives of religious

traditions, and are actively seeking ways to include broader political diversity in addition to religious diversity (see: *Rooms of Interfaith* by Eboo Patel). Additionally, with having staff members and alumni who identify as more traditional, evangelical Christian, who are able to articulate how they hold exclusive truth claims while still engaging with people who are different from themselves, really helps interfaith leaders understand how to encounter serious difference.

**7. Studies show that there is a continuous downward trend in religiosity, especially regarding affiliation and the institutional modes of religious identity such as worship attendance and participation in religious rituals and traditions. Do you think this is problematic? What implications does it have for IFYC and interfaith work in general?**

If IFYC and interfaith dialogues continue to favor those with clear religious/non-religious identity groups, then I think many of these increasingly non-religious and unaffiliated young people will not see their role in the dialogue. Sometimes, entering into interfaith dialogue means declaring your identity group, and thus putting yourself into a box of that group. Whether a person is religious or non-religious, Christian, Muslim, or atheist, this question of identity usually kicks off interfaith events. I think to accommodate to this growing trend of young people who don't want to put themselves in those boxes, we should think about creative ways to include those people who may not have "roots" in any particular tradition. Formalizing this practice will do great things for sustaining interfaith dialogue efforts that are inclusive of those on the fringe and margin of identity groups.

**8. What role have the institutional modes of religious identity (worship attendance, participation in religious rituals and traditions, your religion's beliefs etc.) played in your life and interfaith work? Did your involvement in IFYC affect your participation in them or thoughts about them? If so, how?**

Since studying religion and being involved with interfaith work, I have increasingly noticed the contrast between institutionalized religion and a more "DIY" (do-it-yourself) approach to spirituality. Through hearing stories from people of both of those spiritual/religious persuasions, I have grown to deeply respect and admire both of those paths. I see the need for both in people's lives, and personally have used both to enrich my own religious/spiritual life.

**9. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

## Respondent 7

### 1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?

I first was introduced to IFYC while I was pursuing my Master of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary. Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer teamed up with Princeton Seminary professor Dr. Kenday Creasy-Dean to teach a 3 week intensive course called “Engaging Youth in Interfaith Leadership.” I participated in that course and continued to stay in touch with IFYC through their alumni program. Unlike most IFYC alumni, I didn’t actually participate in the Better Campaign, nor did I attend an Interfaith Leadership Institute as a student, and I never participated in co-curricular interfaith activities. When I first entered into a relationship with IFYC, my interest in interfaith work was primarily academic. Through the course I took with Eboo and Cassie, however, I realized interfaith work could have an integral role in my vocation. As an alumni I’ve participated in IFYC’s Alumni Gathering (January 2014), I’ve attended 3 ILIs as a staff ally to students, and twice as an alumni panelist, I’ve written blogs for IFYC, I serve on IFYC’s Alumni Speakers Bureau, and have co-written and co-edited an IFYC resource called “Advancing Interfaith Cooperation as A Higher Education Professional: IFYC Alumni Perspectives.” (<http://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/IFYCALumniPerspectives.pdf>)

IFYC taught me the difference between diversity and pluralism and how to take interfaith work beyond dialogue into social changing action. I had been interested in interfaith dialogue since college, but hadn’t really been introduced to *interfaith cooperation* until I came into contact with IFYC. To me that made a big difference. Maintaining a relationship with IFYC has helped me create interfaith networks; for example, as an evangelical Christian I couldn’t find many fellow-believers who thought interfaith work was something worth doing. IFYC introduced me to Cameron Nations and Greg Damhorst who founded Faith Line Protestants for which I know write ([www.faithlineprotestants.org](http://www.faithlineprotestants.org)) on the side and Amber Hacker, IFYC’s alumni director has been a great source of support. I am a higher education professional working in the Interfaith Center at the University of North Florida – and as a higher ed. Professional IFYC has provided amazing resources that make my job a lot easier.

### 2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?

In general, my bias says yes it’s important to have a strong religious identity. As an evangelical Christian it’s my desire that everyone know Jesus and be committed to the Gospel. However, in my interfaith work, I would say no, it’s not important. I have worked with many college students have turned into phenomenal interfaith leaders who do not have what most would consider a traditionally strong commitment to their religious identity. One of my student staff currently



identifies as agnostic, and through her interfaith work she has come to more clearly define what being “agnostic” means to her. It’s actually exciting to see what interfaith work can do for cultivating identities. But to be involved in interfaith work, one must be committed to building relationships with people who believe differently from them. A person doesn’t necessarily have a “strong” religious identity.

**3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

I usually identify myself as an evangelical Christian because of my commitment to using the Bible as a my “guide” to right living and because of my desire for all people to know Jesus. I’m heavily influenced by my charismatic Christian upbringing. I participate in my religious tradition through prayer, reflection, worship on my own and communally, service, and attending church (just to name a few things).

**4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

Yes, I’ve been involved in one religious community or another my whole life.

**5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

I think that my ability to *articulate* and *express* my religious identity was strengthened through my involvement with IFYC specifically and interfaith work in general. I think this is largely because of IFYC’s emphasis on storytelling as a way to bridge difference (this resonates with my religious tradition because “testimony” is a large part of evangelism). Also, IFYC has given me so many opportunities to speak publicly about my identity as an evangelical and my role in interfaith work, so I’ve had to learn each time how to better and better articulate those things.

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism, which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

IFYC excels at “active seeking of understanding across lines of difference” and “dialogue that reveals common understandings.” I think IFYC, and really the interfaith movement in general, could use some improvement in teaching young people to still hold their deepest religious commitments. I think this gets better and better as the student interfaith movement matures, but I

still regularly see people within interfaith work watering down their language and beliefs in order to make interfaith cooperation work. This year at the Atlanta ILI a conversation was added to the student program about the “common good” vs. the “greater good” and I think this a great first step – how do we understand what is actually “commonly good” vs. what an individual’s greater good might be?

I think IFYC also has energetic engagement with religious and non-religious diversity down – I think we need to start having more conversations about the intersectionality of different kinds of diversity with religious/non-religious diversity.

**7. Studies show that there is a continuous downward trend in religiosity, especially regarding affiliation and the institutional modes of religious identity such as worship attendance and participation in religious rituals and traditions. Do you think this is problematic? What implications does it have for IFYC and interfaith work in general?**

As a Christian I find it problematic, as a U.S. citizen, I don’t necessarily. I think a lot of this is a trend and as we see different religious communities adapt to the changing time we’ll likely see a return of the millennials to religious communities (maybe my hunch is wrong!) I think the implications it has for IFYC and interfaith work is that we need to start talking about how learning to talk across religious difference is a good place for learning to talk across ideological difference in general. While it seems the population is trending downward in religiosity, it seems to me (I don’t have solid data on this right now) that political and social ideological commitments are trending up creating their own kind of polarization. Perhaps this is an illusion created by Facebook and Twitter – but I think if we can talk across religious difference, then we can talk across other ideological differences...we just have to learn how to articulate that within the interfaith movement.

**8. What role have the institutional modes of religious identity (worship attendance, participation in religious rituals and traditions, your religion's beliefs etc.) played in your life and interfaith work? Did your involvement in IFYC effect your participation in them or thoughts about them? If so, how?**

I’ve been a bit of a denominational hopper throughout my spiritual journey, though my commitment to evangelicalism has remained fairly consistent. Worship attendance is very important to me, but through my seminary studies, I felt it was important for me to experience a diversity of ritual experience amidst the Christian traditions. In some ways this parallels with my commitment to interfaith work. I don’t know that I can say IFYC affected my participating or thoughts about religious rituals, beliefs etc. But IFYC has provided opportunities for me to explore how to understand my beliefs, tradition, and identity as a Christian in a pluralistic context. IFYC’s idea of creating theologies of interfaith cooperation has proved incredibly helpful for me and has been a big part of my growth as an interfaith leader.

**9. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

## **Respondent 8**

### **1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?**

I first became involved with IFYC when a good friend and I registered for a Leadership Institute during the summer of 2011, after our freshman year at Providence College, a small, Catholic, liberal arts college in New England. Unfortunately, since my college did not as of that time have any resources for interfaith dialogue or work, we were not able to benefit from the leadership institute in the sense that we gained tangible tools to take back to campus (since the institute seemed to run upon an assumed basis that there was already an interfaith group in place, and that there was some minimal amount of support for interfaith work on campus, of which we had neither). However, the values of IFYC strongly resonated with my own values that had developed during my freshman year of college, as a Muslim at a strongly Catholic institution who made the conscious choice to immerse myself into the Catholic faith to learn more about another religion, as well as to share my own faith (especially since it's a faith that is often misunderstood). IFYC reinforced in idea - through their institutional values and goals - and in practice - through the gathering of people from such diverse faith and non-faith traditions, and degrees of profession - that it is indeed possible to maintain one's own beliefs while also appreciating, celebrating, and learning about those that are different from one's own, which is a value I carried with me through my undergraduate career at Providence College, where I often encountered messages and individuals who insisted that such pluralistic dynamics were not possible.

### **2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?**

In general, I am a believer that it's necessary for one to have a strong sense of identity and belonging in his/her own faith tradition (or non-faith or secular tradition, if applicable) prior to immersing oneself into another religion or into interfaith dialogue. It's important to understand what your own religion believes, practices, and values prior to engaging with another religion or tradition's viewpoint or approach to these same matters. It's absolutely imperative to have a strong foothold in your own origins and roots before pursuing or learning about others', since we all need a literal and metaphorical place to stand upon as we learn about and engage others. Without such a foundation, it becomes easy for one to fall into a misconception about interfaith dialogue, which is that the point is to eliminate and water down all differences and focus solely on those things that are held in common. Generally, my sense is that if you don't have a strong understanding of your own tradition, and the nuances and differences that exist between your own tradition and other traditions, it's more easy for this to occur. Beyond the interfaith dialogue world, I think people generally don't have a strong sense of their religious identity, due to such

reasons as poor education, failures of religious communities and those held responsible for a child's religious education, etc., and I've witnessed this in my own Muslim community as well as in other religious communities I've encountered.

**3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

I identify myself as a Muslim. I was raised within the Sunni tradition of Islam, and while most of my practices therefore are informed and shaped by the Sunni practice, I would today identify more as a Sufi Muslim. Sufism is a branch of Islam that seeks to go beyond mere doctrine and outwardly practice of religion and delve deeper into spirituality and the human experience, and thus Sufism is a branch of Islam that is approachable for anyone with a seeking heart and mind (in fact, it was actually introduced to me by a Catholic priest at my college). I am involved with my religious tradition by praying five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and engaging in acts of charity (both of the monetary sense but also in terms of my service towards others and in striving to be kind and compassionate to all whom I interact with).

**4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

Yes, I was involved with my religious community prior to engaging with IFYC.

**5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

IFYC most strengthened my religious identity as a Muslim by creating a space that brought together similar-minded Muslims who shared my value for interfaith dialogue just as strongly and passionately as the value and importance held for our Islamic faith. Both IFYC and my fellow Muslims (and the other participants, in different ways) showed me that it was indeed possible to maintain a strong sense of one's own faith while also appreciating, valuing, and participating in other religions and belief systems.

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism, which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

I don't feel that I've been involved with IFYC strongly enough to answer this question; this is not because I don't have a connection to IFYC, but rather because I was unable to tap into the

resources offered by IFYC: my undergraduate institution had such little support for interfaith work, and during the leadership institute I noticed that every other college represented did have support, and so I was not able to benefit from and be involved with IFYC in a way that would lend me to know the institution well.

**7. Studies show that there is a continuous downward trend in religiosity, especially regarding affiliation and the institutional modes of religious identity such as worship attendance and participation in religious rituals and traditions. Do you think this is problematic? What implications does it have for IFYC and interfaith work in general?**

Although I am open and understand the trend of my generation gearing towards spirituality versus association with a religion (i.e. through statements like "I'm spiritual but not religious), and while the Qur'an does speak not only to Muslims and not only to religious folks but also to those who actively and persistently seek the truth (which incidentally sometimes does not include those who affiliate with a religion), I am a little concerned about the decrease in religiosity in the form of adhering to practices subscribed and recommended by religions. So, for Muslims, this would be not following the pillars of Islam, not being involved with a mosque community, not keeping Halal, etc. This isn't to say that these practices should be followed blindly and without thought, but rather that the opposite - spirituality without direction, from some source (whether it be religion or something/someone external to oneself) isn't necessarily helpful either. A Catholic priest I have a close relationship with said it well: we need religion (or something beyond ourselves) to hold onto in our spiritual journeys and quests, otherwise the world of spirituality is too vast and big for us to make sense of by ourselves. This is where I think Sufism has a good balance, wherein it recognizes the necessity and importance of tangible adherence and practice, but moves well beyond their physical limitations and towards the intangible spirituality. In other words, I think we all need something tangible to hold onto for security and certainty and for knowledge (we all need some black and white), in order to venture into the intangible (the gray area). In terms of how this affect IFYC and interfaith work, I think it goes back to one of my other answers, wherein one needs to know one's own tradition and standing in order to properly and fully engage with other religions in a way that's meaningful and beneficial for all parties involved. I don't say all of this to imply that those who identify as "spiritual but not religious" are lost or confused, or to pass judgment, but rather that we all need a place to stand.

**8. What role have the institutional modes of religious identity (worship attendance, participation in religious rituals and traditions, your religion's beliefs etc.) played in your life and interfaith work? Did your involvement in IFYC effect your participation in them or thoughts about them? If so, how?**

The institutional aspects of my religion - and of Catholicism's - provided me with a structure and foundation for my faith and spirituality, wherein I'm able to venture deep into questioning and relationships with others and with God, but some sense - minimal as it may be - of who I am,

what I'm seeking, and where I'm going (in this earthly life and beyond). I can't think of a way right now of how IFYC affected my participation in them or thoughts about them, since these things were at play before I was involved with IFYC. I would say that it was my immersion into another religion - by means of becoming involved with my college's Campus Ministry Pastoral Council, taking Catholic theology courses, and regularly attending Catholic Mass services - that more so strengthened my appreciation for institutional modes of religious identity; I'd like to add, however, that it also awakened me to the problems that institutional religion plays in our local and global communities, wherein some religious people become so entrenched with the outward practice that it becomes a blind adherence, which can sometimes lead to extremist approaches to religion or intense exclusion of others who do not subscribe to it (both within the religion, and beyond).

Please feel free to let me know if you have any other questions, or if you'd like to know more about something I discussed here. If possible, I'd love to see the final product of your thesis, if you wouldn't mind passing it along once it's complete. I hope this has been helpful, and feel free to let me know if I can help in any other way! Best wishes and prayers for your thesis on a very important and relevant topic! Take good care.

**9. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

## Respondent 9

### **1. Describe your experience and involvement in IFYC (IFYC programs you were in involved in, leadership roles you had, programs/events you had on campus as part of Better Together). What did they teach you about pluralism and how did they contribute to your current involvement in interfaith dialogue?**

I first got involved with IFYC late in 2005 when I was a student at Aurora University outside Chicago. My mentor, a Methodist minister who ran our school's interfaith center, suggested that I tie in with them to help build interfaith work on campus. Since that time, I've done the following things (probably not exhaustive):

Attended every IFYC conference until 2009 when they stopped doing them.

Participated in 2006 Interfaith Immersion Weekend

Participated in 2007 media training

Ran a Day of Interfaith Youth Service at Aurora University in 2007

Presented a workshop at the 2009 conference on Social Media and Interfaith Work

Brought IFYC trainers to University of Denver for workshops

Ran a speed-faithing session on Catholicism for a conference

Served in the inaugural Faiths Act Fellowship class

Attended 5-year reunion of that class

Spoke on interfaith dialogue and digital communications (and immigration) in Italy for the State

Department through IFYC's Alumni Speakers Bureau

Wrote lots of stuff

Ran digital communications for the first Interfaith Leadership Institute in DC

Spoke on panels at two later ILIs

Moderated Twitter discussion with Eboo and Dalai Lama

OK, so that was an exercise in self-indulgence and you don't have to read it. Suffice it to say, I've been tied to IFYC through multiple rebrandings and mission shifts. They've taught me a lot about how to approach building pluralism and social change by extension. Without their work, my frame of understanding religious pluralism in America would be much, much weaker, methinks. As far as the dialogue side of things goes, I was already doing that on campus before IFYC and have continued to do so. At times during the org's history, the focus has shifted from dialogue to action, and my pursuits of discussions across faith lines have happened in many places.

### **2. Do you think it is important to have a strong religious identity (commitment to your religious tradition), both in general and in interfaith work? Why or why not?**

In general...maybe? I suppose it depends on what you want out of it. If religion has never been useful to you, or has hurt you, then probably not. If your religious identity is humanism, then that's that. In interfaith work it's a little muddier, because it often helps to have a launchpad for discussions based on faith. Especially at events where a participant has never met a Jain, say, then noting that you are a Jain could be an entry into great conversations. I've met plenty of people at interfaith events who have said something like "Well, I'm a Christian, basically" or "I

was raised Jewish but now I'm not sure where I am", and those people are the ones who will hopefully benefit from participation.

### **3. How would you describe your religious identity? In what ways do you participate in your religious tradition?**

Raised Catholic. Kind of stopped feeling Catholic when I got to college. Read a bunch of Church history and got interested in it academically. Visited with local Muslims and found that religions are more than their history and customs - they are made of people. Inspired me to reacquaint myself with the faith as a faith. So then I was a Catholic again. As part of my work (post-grad fellowship) with the school's interfaith center, I took students on outings to the local Hindu temple. I learned a bunch in order to help explain things to them, and eventually found myself visiting without students. I spent a lot of time in that place and found myself revealing a kinship with Hinduism. So at this point I usually use "Catholic Hindu" as my label, which itself starts a lot of dialogue.

I don't often attend mass, but when I do, I feel really, really, really Catholic. I find ways to expand that side of my faith-coin outside of the building. Since moving to Colorado, the closest Hindu temple is kind of a ways away, so I don't get there very often, either. But I maintain a devotional practice at home with a friendly little Ganesha in my kitchen.

### **4. Were you involved in your religion and religious community before you participated in IFYC?**

As noted above, sorta. I had mostly divorced myself from the idea of active participation and instead favored general study and knowledge. I look at the interfaith sector as my community now, and I am as active as I can be.

### **5. Do you feel your religious identity was strengthened by your involvement in IFYC? If so, in what ways?**

This is why I responded to your call for help, Megan. If I hadn't walked down the road of interfaith dialogue, especially with the IFYC at my side, I don't know where I'd be on my faith-path. I look at interfaith dialogue, and friendships across faith lines generally, as a way to "sharpen" one's own faith. In the same way that a personal political/social/economic belief can be strengthened by investigating opposite viewpoints, I found my faith invigorated and illuminated by discussions with others. For every time that I realized a similarity between myself and another religion, I found a difference to go along with it. Those kinds of needling little explanations of faith helped me sort out my own theology and practice. I wrote a bit about this recently for IFYC. It might help explain me better than the rambling above:

<http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2015/04/24/talk-to-others-transform-yourself/>

In short, involvement with the interfaith movement has made me a better Catholic and a better Hindu. A common criticism of interfaith work, or even exposure to other faiths than one's own, is that it can "water you down", or worse, create some kind of New Age wishy-washiness that means nothing. I think that's the wrong attitude. As Eboo has said somewhere or other,



paraphrased “The goal of interfaith dialogue is not to convert you or make you think that your beliefs are wrong. It should help to make you a stronger Insert-Faith-Here.”

**6. One of IFYC's main goals is to foster pluralism, which is defined as:**

- A. Energetic engagement with diversity**
- B. Active seeking of understanding across lines of difference**
- C. Encounter of commitments -holding our deepest religious commitments while being open to learning from other religions**
- D. Based on dialogue that reveals common understandings and engages real differences**

**Based on your own experiences, what areas of pluralism does IFYC excel in? In what areas could it improve? Do you have any suggestions?**

I think they do all of these pretty well. C is a tough one for any organization because competing truth claims often...compete with each other. The first option is basically how they start everything, so that's fine. I think a stronger emphasis on dialogue (especially after action) could be useful, but I get why it doesn't take top billing. It can often turn academic, and if someone isn't sufficiently (in their mind) capable of explaining their beliefs, it can be intimidating. We're also dealing with college students, so there's that. Overall, great!

**7. Studies show that there is a continuous downward trend in religiosity, especially regarding affiliation and the institutional modes of religious identity such as worship attendance and participation in religious rituals and traditions. Do you think this is problematic? What implications does it have for IFYC and interfaith work in general?**

Mildly problematic, especially because it concerns IFYC's target audience. I think that one of the byproducts of interfaith work could be renewed interest in worship and participation, even if it means going to someone else's house of worship for a given week. The goals of this work should include “making religion cool again” because it is normally not very cool. One of the things holding this back is that until recently, the interfaith sphere was entirely peopled with white-haired seniors. Now with more youth embracing religious pluralism and acting on their beliefs, we might see a resurgence.

**8. What role have the institutional modes of religious identity (worship attendance, participation in religious rituals and traditions, your religion's beliefs etc.) played in your life and interfaith work? Did your involvement in IFYC effect your participation in them or thoughts about them? If so, how?**

Made me a better worshipper is all I'll say, I think. With a refined idea of the divine, focusing on prayer is a bit easier. A lot of people are fine on the participation side but might suck at worship, or approach it from a place of “this is not about me”. Well, it is about you, and you have some decisions to make about what you're worshipping and how you feel about it. If you don't receive

a benefit, there's no point. You weren't created (by god or nature) to mindlessly repeat platitudes - you need to do something.

Like preach, which is apparently what I did there.

**9. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

Good luck - lemme know if you need anything else!

## Appendix B: Society-focused vs. Religious-focused Word Use in IFYC Annual Reports

### *Society-Focused Words*

Issue	Issue Length	Service	Cooperation	Leader/Leadership	Society
2005	10	60	2	33	1
2006	26	28	10	30	3
2007	17	18	2	24	1
2008	28	6	10	33	2
2009	16	1	16	29	1
2010	35	11	34	43	3
2011	14	10	23	31	2
2012	24	8	28	39	2
2013	12	7	10	12	2
2014	16	6	17	4	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>17</b>

### *Religious-Focused Words*

Issue	Issue Length	Religious identity	Dialogue	Pluralsim	Religion
2005	10	1	11	0	3
2006	26	1	4	0	1
2007	17	0	7	0	9
2008	28 (respecting it)	2	6	19	6
2009	16	0	0	0	0
2010	35	0	6	0	9
2011	14 (only identification)	0	2	0	3
2012	24	0	1	7	4
2013	12	0	0	0	1
2014	16	0	0	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>41</b>

## Appendix C: Sample Interfaith YTM Schedule

### Summer I

#### Morning Session (9:00)

- Music
- Speaker, discussion

#### Theology Class (10:30)

- Youth take a theology class about their own religion

#### Dialogue Groups (11:30)

- Religiously diverse
- Discuss what they learned
  - o Teaching the other people in their group
- Discuss how this relates to their interfaith work

#### Lunch (12:00)

#### Service Sites (1:00)

- Religiously diverse groups
- Reflection after service

#### Free Time (3:30 or whenever they get back from their service site)

#### Dinner (5:30)

#### Free Time

#### Prayer Service (7:30)

- Prayer form from a different religion each night
- Led by a counselor and youth from that religion
- Counselor gives a testimony of their faith

#### Dialogue Circle (10:00)

- Small groups
- Religiously diverse and include a mixture of Summer I and Summer II youth
- Same group each night
- Reflect on the day

## Summer II

### Morning Session (9:00)

- Music
- Speaker, discussion

### Theology Class (10:30)

- Youth take a theology class about their own religion

### Dialogue Groups (11:30)

- Religiously diverse
- Discuss what they learned
  - o Teaching the other people in their group
- Discuss how this relates to their interfaith work

### Lunch (12:00)

### Interfaith Leadership training and time to work on projects (1:00)

- Includes discussion on how interfaith can be used to help address social problems and how the theology of different religions relates to them
- Teach youth how to leading interfaith dialogue
- Trip to an interfaith organization

### Free Time (3:30)

### Dinner (5:30)

### Free Time

### Prayer Service (7:30)

- Prayer form from a different religion each night
- Led by a counselor and youth from that religion
- Counselor gives a testimony of their faith

### Dialogue Circle (10:00)

- Small groups
- Religiously diverse and include a mixture of Summer I and Summer II youth
- Same group each night
- Reflect on the day