



AFFIRMING IDENTITY, ACHIEVING PLURALISM: INSIGHTS FROM INTERFAITH YOUTH WORK

By Eboo Patel

We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.
—Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?,” 1967

This article aims to develop a practical sociology of interfaith youth work. I begin by highlighting the significance that faith communities place on maintaining religious identity and the challenges that the pluralist modern world poses to religious identity. I go on to articulate a vision of a pluralist civil society that is respectful of different religious identities and encourages understanding and cooperation between diverse religious communities. I draw from my personal life as a Muslim in America, my professional experience as Executive Director of the Interfaith Youth Core, and my academic training as a sociologist of religion to analyze the contextual issues surrounding interfaith youth work. I hope to provide a roadmap that helps interfaith youth work practitioners navigate those issues effectively.

Maintaining Religious Identity in the Modern World

A leader in the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago responded to my invitation to involve Catholic youth in Interfaith Youth Core programs with the following statement:

My primary concern is that Catholic kids become better Catholics. I want them to know more about the Catholic tradition and to be more active in Catholic practices and institutions. Look, I think my religion has the banquet. I agree that all religions are holy and have something to offer, but I think Catholicism has the feast.

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This way of thinking is not unique to Catholic leaders. It is common to people of all religions at all levels of leadership who have a stake in their own salvation, the success of the institutions that preserve their tradition, and the religious identity of their community's youth. Tariq Ramadan expresses a sentiment similar to the Catholic leader quoted above in his book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*: "How can the flame of faith, the light of the spiritual life, and faithfulness to the teachings of Islam be preserved in environments that no longer refer to God and in educational systems that have little to say about religion?"¹ Any attempt to work with youth in religious communities must begin with the understanding that the preservation of religious identity is perhaps the single most important concern of faith communities.

But, to extend the metaphor of the Catholic leader quoted above, we no longer live in a world of separate banquet halls, each exclusively holding the "feast" of our religious tradition and protecting against the intrusion of other types of "food." Our world has always been diverse, but never before have so many people from so many different backgrounds been in such frequent and intense contact. As Diana Eck writes, "The encounter of worlds and worldviews is the shared experience of our times."²

Sociological theories of modernity illuminate the impact that this intense interaction has on religious identity. The sociologist Peter Berger explains the socialization process:

Worlds are socially constructed and socially maintained. Their continuing reality ... depends on specific social processes, namely those processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question ... Each world requires a social "base" for its continuing existence. This "base" may be called its plausibility structure.³

In previous eras, what Berger called "the pre-modern situation," a community's

plausibility structures (otherwise known as institutions) tended to fully encapsulate its members and could therefore direct their lives.

This is how things are done, and not in any other way. This is how one marries (and whom); this is how one raises children, makes one's livelihood, exercises power, goes to war—and not in any other way ... this is who one is—and one could not be anyone or anything else.⁴

But the modern situation, Berger explained, is dramatically different:

Modernity pluralizes. Where there used to be one or two institutions, there now are fifty. Institutions, however, can best be understood as programs for human activity. Thus, what happens is that where there used to be one or two programs in a particular area of human life, there now are fifty.⁵

Today, people spend less time encapsulated by the institutions of their traditional communities and more time in spaces where there are frequent interactions between people of diverse backgrounds. This leads to constant exposure to lifestyles and perspectives different from those encouraged by the traditional community. In previous eras, an individual received the same basic message about her identity from her family, peer group, house of worship, and school. In the modern situation, an individual can receive dramatically different messages about how she should live and what she should believe from the family and the school, the house of worship, and the peer group. Berger claims that in the pre-modern situation, individuals experienced their identities as fate. In the modern situation, characterized by a plethora of alternatives, they view their identities as a matter of choice.⁶

The move from fate to choice means that, as Giddens writes, "the self has become a *reflexive project*."⁷ Faced with a variety of ways of

being, believing, and belonging, individuals are required to reflect upon the identity they want and justify the choices they make. Giddens states: “In a cosmopolitan world, more people than ever are regularly in contact with others who think differently from them. They are required to justify their beliefs, in an implicit way at least, both to themselves and others.”⁸

Modernity, then, presents a whole new set of challenges for a community committed to passing on its tradition to the next generation. Today’s grandparents, who might not have had any significant contact with people from other traditions or certainly not the same broad range of exposure, were more likely to accept uncritically the practices and worldview of their community. This is in sharp contrast to the younger generations, who have a whole range of choices. From the perspective of the leader of a religious community, Chief Rabbi of Britain Jonathan Sacks writes:

Long gone are the days when our identities, beliefs and life chances were narrowly circumscribed by where and to whom we happened to be born. We are no longer actors in a play written by tradition and directed by community, in which roles are allocated by accidents of birth. Instead, careers, relationships and lifestyles have become things we freely choose from a superstore of alternatives.”⁹

This social dynamic is vividly illustrated by the plot in Chaim Potok’s novel *The Chosen*.¹⁰ The book opens with the following lines: “For the first fifteen years of our lives, Danny and I lived within five blocks of each other and neither of us knew of the other’s existence.” It goes on to describe how the various Jewish communities in Brooklyn lived in what amounted to cocoons, “each with its own rabbi, its own little synagogue, its own customs, its own fierce loyalties.” The book is set in the World

War II era, a time when some Jewish leaders felt it necessary to prove their community’s “Americanness.” So a baseball league was formed as a way to demonstrate that Jews were connected to American culture. It is here that the son of a charismatic Hasidic rabbi, Danny, meets the son of a more acculturated Jewish scholar, Reuven. Danny and Reuven develop a friendship that challenges each of their received identities. While Reuven acquires a respect for

the harsh and foreign ways of the Hasids, Danny decides to pursue a career in psychology, an interest he developed through secret meetings with Reuven’s father in the public library. Encounters on the baseball diamond

and in the public library shaped the life choices and perspectives of two teenagers who would otherwise have lived out the script provided by their birth and directed by their community.

Danny and Reuven’s lives, however fictional, demonstrate the shift from fate to choice in the modern process of identity formation. Their modern choices challenge faith communities that seek to pass down their tradition in a world where their children are free to adopt other practices and worldviews.

Thus far, I have discussed the challenges that modern interactional diversity poses to faith communities. But, the question of how Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and others are interact with one another, as they live, study, and work in increasingly close quarters, has significant implications for the future of our broader society as well.

Pluralism, Religious Identity, and Interfaith Youth Work

Political philosopher Michael Walzer writes that the challenge of a diverse society is to embrace its diversity while maintaining a common life.¹¹ This suggests the need for all communities within a diverse society to take responsibility for embracing a common life while maintaining their uniqueness. It is this dynamic that leads to the ideal of the

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pluralist society as a “community of communities” envisioned by scholars like Martin Marty, John Rawls, and Robert Bellah. Martin Luther King Jr., infusing this political philosophy with his own Christian spirituality, called this “the beloved community.”

Diana Eck suggests that this ideal is only achieved by the intentional and positive engagement of differences. Mere diversity, Eck maintains, is simply the fact of people from different backgrounds living in close quarters. *Pluralism*, on the other hand, is when people from different backgrounds seek mutual understanding and positive cooperation with one another.

There are very real dangers to not following the path of pluralism. A chasm of ignorance between different religious communities can too easily be filled by bigotry, often turning into violence. In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington states that the dominant characteristic of the post-Cold War global order is violence between different ethnic and religious groups.¹² While I agree with Huntington’s critics, who point out that his thesis is misguided when it suggests that the world’s traditions are inherently and inevitably in conflict with each other, the news headlines make clear that far too much violence in our world is somehow related to ethnic and religious difference.

Ashutosh Varshney’s work on Hindu-Muslim conflict in India provides empirical evidence regarding the role that strong cooperative relationships between diverse communities can play in preventing conflict. In *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, he writes:

What accounts for the difference between communal peace and violence? ... The pre-existing local networks of civic engagement between the two communities stand out as the single most important proximate cause. Where such networks of engagement exist, tensions and conflicts were regulated and managed; where they are miss-

ing, communal identities led to endemic and ghastly violence.¹³

In the United States, the most religiously diverse country in the world, we have dangerously thin relationships between religious communities. At the 2003 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Atlanta, sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow was asked how he thought faith communities were adapting to the reality of religious diversity in close quarters. He used the metaphor of an elevator: Christians, Muslims, Jews and the rest of America’s religious diversity are all riding in it together, we are increasingly aware of the other people around us, but we are doing just about everything we can to avoid real interaction.

I think one of the reasons for this situation is the division between “inter” and “faith” in American life. There are increasing numbers of spaces where people from diverse religious communities gather: public schools, shopping malls, universities, YMCAs, corporations, etc. These can be understood as spaces of “inter.” There are many places in our society where people from particular religious communities come together to talk about religion. They are called synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, etc. These are spaces of “faith.” But there are precious few spaces where people from diverse religions come together and are intentional about matters of religion.

One personal example of this division between “inter” and “faith,” which I believe is common in American life, took place in the cafeteria of my middle-class suburban high school in the early 1990s. The group I ate lunch with included a Jew, a Mormon, a Hindu, and a Lutheran. We were all religious to a degree, but we almost never talked about our religion with each other. Often, somebody would announce at the table that they couldn’t eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a certain period of time. Or somebody would say that they could not play basketball over the weekend because “of some prayer thing” that they were being forced to go to by their parents. We all knew religion hovered behind these behaviors, but nobody

ever offered any deeper explanation than “my mom said” and nobody ever asked for one.

As Bellah *et al* observed in *Habits of the Heart*, one of the primary characteristics of religious life in contemporary America is that it has become “privatized.”¹⁴ This is precisely what happened to my friends and me. The reason for this was we had not been taught a “language” that would allow us to explain our faith convictions to people outside of our faith communities. In my case, my religious education consisted of learning the private language of the Ismaili Muslim faith—the prayers, the devotional songs, the rites and ceremonies. It was a language which served me well within the Ismaili Muslim community but felt irrelevant in other situations. I felt I had to leave the Ismaili Muslim part of myself behind when I entered the diversity of the public square.

Jonathan Sacks developed a notion of “languages” to address the challenge of nurturing commitments in both parochial communities, characterized by race, religion, and ethnicity, and in the broader society. To achieve this, Sacks claims that we have to learn two languages. He writes: “There is a first and public language of citizenship that we have to learn if we are to learn to live together. And there is a variety of second languages which connect us to our local framework of relationships.”¹⁵

Building on Sacks’ notion of dual languages, I propose that, in addition to knowing one’s private language of faith, there is an urgent need to learn also one’s “public language of faith,” which I define as a language that emphasizes how one’s commitment to a particular faith tradition enriches the broader society. In other words, the “public language of faith” articulates how what makes you a more faithful Jew, Christian, or Muslim also makes you a better citizen. For example, the command to minister to the poor and marginalized found in Deuteronomy of the Hebrew Bible, Matthew 25 of the Gospels, and Sura 93 of the Qur’an, is one way a religious commitment clearly encourages the faithful Jew, Christian, and Muslim to be of service to the broader society. Becoming familiar with these dimensions of one’s religious tradi-

tion and developing fluency in articulating them in diverse settings beyond one’s own religious community is the goal of learning one’s own respective public language of faith.

The importance of learning a public language of faith was brought home to me in a conversation with one of my best friends from high school, a Jew. There was a group of kids in my high school who took up scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and shouting similar obscene comments in the hallways. A few years after we graduated from high school, my Jewish friend shared with me how deeply those comments cut him, and worse, how he felt betrayed by the silence of the people he thought were his close friends. I apologized for my complicity in his suffering. He accepted this apology, and then stated, “I wonder if any of you even realized I was Jewish. None of us ever talked about religion.”

This revelation does not excuse our inaction in those days, but it does highlight the dangers of diversity without pluralism. Our religious identities remained private because we had no language with which to express our faith to the world of diversity beyond our parochial communities. And without that public language, we had no ability to combat even the most heinous abuse. Had the high school bullies chosen to go after Muslims, I think I would have suffered alone, like my Jewish friend.

Creating and expanding the spaces where religiously diverse people gather to work on matters of religious diversity, and thus develop a public language of faith, is the task of interfaith organizations. The goal of interfaith work is intimidated by the term itself: “inter” means our relationships with other people, especially those from different traditions, as was the case at my high school lunch table; “faith” means, in the W.C. Smith sense, the relationship individuals have with their cumulative historical religious tradition.¹⁶ As I suggested earlier, there is plenty of “inter” in our society, and a good bit of “faith,” but not enough “interfaith.” “Interfaith” is when our experience of the diversity of modern life and our connections to our religious traditions cohere in such a way that we develop faith identities that encourage

us to interact with others in intentional and appreciative ways. It is the goal of being rooted in our own traditions and in relationship with others. It is accomplished through the development and use of a public language of faith that connects us to our parochial community while allowing us to be citizens of a diverse society.

This public language of faith allows us not only to prevent conflict but also to bridge and multiply the social capital that exists in diverse faith communities, social capital that would otherwise be isolated. For example, over 50 percent of youth volunteers in the United States say that they received their start in doing service through their religious community. A public language of faith would allow us to connect youth volunteers across different religious communities in massive service projects, and also bring their parents, active parishioners, and religious leaders into positive relationship with one another.

Affirming Identity, Achieving Pluralism

If religious identity is to be sustained in the modern world, it will have to be affirmed and articulated amidst religious diversity. Religious communities developed their approaches to faith formation for a perceived world of isolated banquet halls. They are searching for strategies to affirm religious identity in a world of high-velocity interaction. Interfaith youth work can help create partnerships between youth and faith communities in fostering this goal. Interfaith youth work can help young people develop a language of faith that is relevant to the world of diversity, where they spend most of their time, thus encouraging them to affirm their faith identity. And because this language of faith encourages positive relations between diverse religious youth and communities, we are helping achieve pluralism.

I will end with the story of a woman I know who runs a large community develop-

ment program in the heart of Brooklyn. Against the advice of her skeptical boss, she started an interfaith youth initiative. She justified the move by pointing out that religion is the world's greatest motivator of service, and also its most potent force of division. "If this neighborhood can harness the energies of its religiously diverse youth, it has a chance at transformation. But if we continue to ignore the fact that faith is a central part of people's

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lives, then the petty bickering between communities could snowball and balkanize us."

"Why do you think religion is so important?" I asked her.

"My father was a friend of Dorothy Day. He was part of her

Catholic Worker movement from its beginnings. When I was a kid, he would take me to St Joseph's House on the lower east side and we would cut carrots and celery for the soup kitchen. 'God wants us to do this work,' he would tell me, citing the example of Catholic saints and quoting from the Gospels.

"My father got sick when I was still young, and Dorothy often visited him in the hospital. She made it a point to spend a few minutes with me every time she visited, and she noticed that I was always reading. The next time she came, she brought a copy of her autobiography *The Long Loneliness* and signed it for me. My father told me that I would cherish that book my whole life."

"So you combined religion and service early in your life," I said.

She smiled. "I lost that focus when I was a teenager. But in my twenties, I went to Egypt and lived with Sufi Muslims. Their focus on submitting to the will of God through prayer and service reminded me of my father's commitment, and the example that Dorothy Day set. It was my Muslim friends in the Middle East who encouraged me to explore my Catholic roots."

My friend's experience in an informal interfaith encounter strengthened her faith

and called her into a life of service. And it inspired her to organize formal inter-faith programs so that the diverse religious

communities in her neighborhood could affirm their distinctive identities and, working together, achieve pluralism. ❖

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1. See Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
 2. See Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).
 3. See Peter Berger's *A Rumor of Angels* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1969) and *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).
 4. See Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979).
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).
 8. Ibid.
 9. Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality, and Society in a Secular Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991).
 10. See Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1967).
 11. See Michael Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* (New York: Marsilio, 1996).
 12. See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1998).
 13. See Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
 14. See Robert Bellah, with Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (London: University of California, 1985).
 15. See Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*.
 16. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).