

Interfaith Engagement: How Theology can Address Our Differences

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This paper, which is part of a much larger project, focuses on the role theology can play in deepening discussions in interfaith dialogue and engagement. By examining historical trends and current realities that show how interfaith engagement has grown and changed, I am able to set the stage for understanding the role of theology in the larger picture. This project is based largely in the idea that in interfaith cooperation and engagement, there is going to be disagreement. Interfaith asks and encourages people from very different worldviews to work together toward a common goal. People are bound to have differing opinions, ideas, and ideologies when asked to engage in dialogue with people from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. We all understand the world around us and engage with it according to our personal convictions and beliefs. By using theology as a tool, I believe there is a genuine opportunity to allow people to incorporate their individual identity and beliefs into understanding their role in the larger project of interfaith cooperation. Everyone brings something different to the table with them, whether that is the intention or not. Putting a focus on theology allows people to sit in the discomfort of deep disagreement with others, be honest about their points of view, and meaningfully examine and think about how their personal perspective influences their participation in interfaith engagement.

Looking through a historical lens at interfaith work, I was able to discern two important threads that make up what we now see in current modes of interfaith work. These two parts give historical context to the aspects of interfaith engagement that are most important; community action and dialogue. The first thread is that of single-issue action. This is when various religious and spiritual groups organize themselves together to work around a specific issue like war or civil rights. These issues are not necessarily specific to a single tradition or practice but have effects on the larger population. The best example of this is considering the people who

participated in and supported the Civil Rights movement, and to narrow it down some more, those who participated in the Selma marches. When the first attempt at the march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, Alabama was unsuccessful, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called for religious leaders around the country to come to Selma and march with him and others as they protested racist voter laws in Alabama that kept black people from voting.¹ In the end, 2,000 people marched with Dr. King. Religious leaders brought groups of people with them to show solidarity in a struggle that was hard to ignore. In images, one can see Protestant ministers linking arms with Jewish Rabbis, and Catholic nuns and priests.² During that march, people came together, regardless of religion to prove that people cared about and were paying attention to what was happening in Alabama and the Civil Rights Movement. Differences were set aside to fight for what Christians would call 'the least of these'. It is in situations like this that common ground is so important. Without a common understanding of what would be the best version of our society, things like the march to Montgomery would not have such high involvement from such a diverse group of people.

The growth out of single-issue action had been developing grassroots groups to focus not on one issue in a community, but to create a network of people who are able to work on and respond to a variety of issues that a single community may face. Organizations like the United Religions Initiative (URI) work to bring religious groups together to work in their communities on those things that need the most attention.³ This requires not only action, but communication and dialogue between groups about how to best serve their communities.

¹ "Selma to Montgomery March," *The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute*, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/selma-montgomery-march>.

² "Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel on the Selma March, March 21, 1965," *Jewish Women's Archive*, <https://jwa.org/media/abraham-joshua-heschel-on-selma-march-1965>.

³ "Who We Are," *The United Religions Initiative*, <https://www.uri.org/who-we-are>.

The second thread that is followed in this project is dialogue. It is integral to understanding how theology can be used in interfaith work. Dialogue is where people get into conversations about not only about their common work, but the things that do make them different. The Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) uses interfaith dialogue as a tool to teach college students how to converse with and relate to people who may have extremely different worldviews from oneself.⁴ They use dialogue and relationship building as a tool to thrive in a religiously diverse society, which they put forth as a reality for the United States today.⁵ Dialogue is indeed a great way to learn how to interact and have thoughtful conversations with people we may disagree with, but often times in interfaith work, disagreements on things can be discarded to maintain that common ground discussed previously.

I would like to posit that, instead of glossing over the tension between people, interfaith dialogue should allow for space to sit in and explore that tension. This is not to say that common ground should be disregarded, because it truly is central to getting anything done in an interfaith setting. However, too large of a focus on common ground can erase differences entirely. The end goal of interfaith engagement should not be to get to the tension, explore it, then go home but, rather, to use disagreement as a step toward understanding and accepting other people and their perspectives, which allows engagement to move forward into the community action aspect of Interfaith work. An example of this step not being put into action is the idea of interfaith being a faith. Interfaith literally means between faith, so by turning it into its own separate tradition complete with a doctrine and practices, it is no longer what happens between religious and spiritual traditions, but one of the traditions that interacts with others. Rev. Steven Greenbaum uses his church, the Living Interfaith Church, as an example of how Interfaith as a faith works in

⁴ “What is Interfaith Cooperation?” *Interfaith Youth Core*, <https://www.ifyc.org/interfaith>.

⁵ Ibid.

his book, *Practical Interfaith*.⁶ In theory, members are able to retain their personal practices while participating and attending the church.⁷ This method, however, allows people to practice however they feel comfortable while letting go of the original intentions behind the practices, since the church is not about, “the religion we practice, but how we practice our religion.”⁸ This particular study does maintain some of the core values of interfaith work outside of their church, those of respect, compassion, and love.⁹ Greenbaum cites the Golden Rule as something that many religious traditions have in common and is therefore the core of his church’s values.¹⁰ With this example they take the things people often disagree over—theology and doctrine—out of the equation. Doctrine and belief are central to how one navigates a tradition, and Interfaith as a faith dismisses those things because they create divides.¹¹ There are way in which those values of respect, compassion, and love can still be central to how one understands their relationships to others in interfaith work without disregarding the beliefs they hold because they clash. One can believe that for them, and the other people they know, the things they believe are the right path for them, while respecting that the things other people believe are the right path for them. By talking through those differences and really understanding why people choose to believe what they believe, one can show compassion and love for their neighbors and still not necessarily see eye to eye.

In many ways, the structure and focus of the Living Interfaith Church feels like a way to opt out of the discomfort this project aims to directly address. By setting aside differences, people are not able to sit with the discomfort of disagreeing and are left with no resources to

⁶ Steven Greenbaum, *Practical Interfaith: How to Find Our Common Humanity as We Celebrate Diversity* (Woodstock: SkyLight Publishing, 2014), 3.

⁷ Ibid. pg. 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. pg. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

explore more deeply their own reasons for choosing a specific religious or spiritual path in life. Interfaith engagement should not ignore differences for the sake of maintaining peace and agreement.

It would be fair to say that interfaith work exists because each person or group that participates in the work and dialogue has different beliefs. This is why it is interfaith, between faiths. The best way I can describe the purpose of this work is to use an example. I want to be able to use something I understand well, so I will use my beliefs as a starting point. In the larger scope of this project, I use theology as a way to understand the call to interfaith work from a particular religious tradition, so using my own experience seemed like the best place to start, especially since a large part of interfaith dialogue is learning to speak from and engage with people based on one's own experiences. John Hick uses his chapter, "The Next Step Beyond Dialogue," to explore what needs to happen to enhance the work already being done through dialogue.¹² This step is toward a dialogue that is open, genuine, accepts religious equality as the norm so people can, "benefit freely from one another's distinctive spiritual insights and be free to join together in facing the massive social and economic and political problems of the world."¹³ The two methods he identifies to do this involve looking to scriptures and theology to provide some grounding for interfaith engagement. One way is to look from one's own faith out into interfaith engagement.¹⁴ The other way, the way I would like to examine my personal experience with interfaith work, is to look at what interfaith engagement is, and see how it fits with what is already happening in a specific tradition.¹⁵

¹² John Hick, "The Next Step beyond Dialogue," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

I am Christian. Specifically, I am United Methodist, which is Protestant Christianity. This already narrows down much of what I, as a Christian could possibly believe. I believe there are only two sacraments (Baptism and Communion), I believe in an open table for communion where anyone who wishes may receive that blessing, and I believe in John Wesley's method for discovering what is truly Christian by using scripture, reason, tradition, and experience as my foundation. So, then, on the basis of this, how can I determine whether or not my involvement in interfaith engagement is truly Christian? This is especially urgent in light of the general idea in Christianity that it is a closed monotheism, meaning Christianity has only one God and that is the only one we believe in. By using Wesley's method, I can begin with scripture. Looking through the Gospels, one can see that Jesus regularly ate with, talked to, and taught people who were not part of his faith.¹⁶ If our mandate as Christians is to be as much like Jesus as we can be (what would Jesus do?), then part of our obligation should be to create community with those who are different from us. Drawing now on tradition and experience, I know that Methodists have engaged with other denominations of Christianity and have worked with people from other religions as well. We participate in the World Council of Churches¹⁷, the Pan-Methodist Commission,¹⁸ and other groups that focus on engaging with people beyond those with whom we agree. Growing up, the Methodists I know worked together on anti-war protests with Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, and others. I also live in a city with a large number of Somali refugees, and since we are committed to helping what could be considered, in as kind a way as we could mean, the least of these, Methodist churches helped refugees in their communities get settled and acclimated to their new homes. So, therefore, I could reasonably say that being engaged in

¹⁶ John 4:1-26 (New Revised Standard Version).

¹⁷ "Member Churches: United Methodist Church," *World Council of Churches*, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/united-methodist-church>.

¹⁸ "Member Denominations," *The Pan Methodist Commission*, <http://panmethodist.org/member-denominations/>.

interfaith work and spending time with people who are just as committed to making their communities better based on their commitment to their faith, is a direct call from my faith and theology into practice.

Now, this whole justification may only work for myself. I am sure there are people even within my own denomination, and even within my own congregation that would disagree with me. Showing other people that my involvement in interfaith work is directly tied my fundamentally Christian values and beliefs is important. I am not doing this because it makes me look good, or it means I get to spend more time with my friends. I'm doing it because there is a way for me to understand a version of Christianity that can work with others in this kind of capacity without a need to evangelize and try to convert people, but to do what I can to make the positive difference I am called to make.

If interfaith dialogue and engagement started from this point, where people think deeply about their own commitments, and how interfaith work fits into that, not only will there be deeper discussions, but people would have to address their disagreements and really talk about how to still operate on common ground when such stark differences exist. Here, I would like to take some cues from Paul F. Knitter and others on how to put these things into action without falling into the trap of religious superiority. Primarily, Knitter's idea that, "religions must respect freedom of conscience."¹⁹ To share openly without an agenda to change someone else, convert them, or demean what they find, "to be true and precious."²⁰ We also return to the idea of finding common ground. Knitter believes there is a lot to find in common when there is a lot of diversity and even when commonality is found, that diversity and difference is still important.²¹ Finally,

¹⁹ Paul F. Knitter, introduction to *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul F. Knitter, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), xi.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., x-xi.

back to the role of dialogue. Knitter posits that dialogue is among one of the most important forms of interfaith engagement.²² Not only do ethical issues facing the world and specific communities get addressed and solutions thought up, but by talking through our ethics, dialogue offers a great opportunity understand one another and think about our differences.²³ Having these conversations allows people to address all these things, have deep conversations about them, and then examine how to put all they have learned into action in their communities.

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²² Ibid. xi.

²³ Ibid.

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