

Being Interfaith Now: New Directions in American Religious Pluralism

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[SLIDE 1] One of the most insightful bits of wisdom I have ever heard about parenting is this: if you do it long enough, you get to eat *all* your words. I now have a teenager in the house, so my appetite for my own words is increasing apace. Last week, for instance, my son was invited to a birthday celebration for a classmate that included tickets to a stadium-sized Christian rock concert. The friend is a nice boy, the parents responsible, and the decks were cleared of homework and chores. So why was I so pleased when we discovered a prior commitment on the calendar? Well, not only because I had hoped that his first rock concert would be something, well, *cooler* than Christian rock, but also because I didn't want him exposed to the conservative theological and social agenda that I assumed attended such events. In fact, it would have been fine with me, having heard about the Bible quotes posted around the boy's home and the creationist and anti-gay positions he reportedly expressed in class, if the relationship fizzled. When I said as much to my son, he came back with, "But mom, his parents let him come over here, and they've seen your bumper stickers." [SLIDE 2] If there's one thing I hate about religious intolerance, it's how annoyingly ironic it is in where it chooses to show up.

As it turns out, recent research on American religious attitudes would predict that this conservative Christian family is more tolerant about their religiously different neighbors than I, and maybe many of us in progressive circles, would have suspected. The perplexing juxtaposition of America's persistent piety and its tolerance--indeed celebration--of religious

difference is the riddle at the heart of my academic work, and as good a starting place as any for my reflections tonight on the state of our national experiment with religious diversity.

Like blackbirds, religious diversity can be looked in many ways. [SLIDE 3] For theologians and philosophers, the fact of religious difference presents itself as a conceptual problem of relating different religious worldviews that may conflict, overlap, or simply appear mutually unintelligible. In this context, one asks about what counts as religious truth and how can we know it? Is there one ultimate spiritual destination or many? Who can be saved and by what power? Are such religious categories transferable across religious lines? How do we reconcile particularity with universality, religious identity with a commitment to pluralism? The operative scheme for the past 30 years for conceptualizing responses to these questions is the exclusivist/ inclusivist/ pluralist typology. Simply put, exclusivism is the view that one's own religion is the sole source of religious truth, and that it alone affords access to salvation. Inclusivists are those who believe that some degree of truth is present in multiple religions, and that salvation may be available in other religions, but is realized most fully or directly in the home tradition. Pluralism, finally, is the view that no one religion can have a monopoly on religious truth, and that all religions are potentially equal paths to salvation. Each of these, of course, has complicated and contested subtypes.

But religious pluralism can also be viewed in the context of other markers of diversity. At Chico State I work closely with the Center for Multicultural and Gender Studies, which offers curricular and extracurricular programming designed to increase awareness, understanding, and justice across lines of social difference. Interestingly, religion has been largely invisible in this diversity work, and I don't think our campus is unique. In most areas of diversity—race, gender, class (though not yet sexuality)—a rudimentary knowledge base and working theoretical

frameworks have developed over the past two generations to help us understand and appreciate each other, or at least mostly get along. Public school children celebrate Dr. King and Cesar Chavez, and whether they love them or hate them most Americans know what a feminist is. Such is not the case, oddly enough, with religion. There is a reason why the activist and academic communities most assertive in promoting an appreciation of diversity in these other areas have generally not put religious difference on the agenda: for many in these communities religious traditions are seen as part of the traditional structures of social hierarchy and domination that their efforts seek to critique and dismantle. The language of religious pluralism, then, rather than becoming part of public conversations about diversity and multiculturalism, remains largely the language of specialists.

Finally, then, we can look at religious diversity from a civic perspective. The foundational American commitment to religious freedom and non-establishment leaves room for terrific conflict as evidenced by recent tensions around the Muslim Community Center near Ground Zero [SLIDE 4], and the Terry Jones Qur'an burning debacle [SLIDE 5]. Religious difference is often invoked in red-state/ blue state shouting matches, and has notoriously fueled the so-called culture war in this country. While Americans consistently express extremely strong support for religious freedom in the abstract, that support wanes when specific religious minorities seek to exercise those freedoms. In this context, religious diversity must be examined as an aspect of civic life; how do we find ways to live with those whose beliefs and practices differ, sometimes sharply from our own, and how can we equitably cohabit the public spaces of town squares, schools, and government? Sociologists analyze trends of assimilation, secularization and privatization, and church-state experts can track patterns of accommodationism and separationism, but ordinary Americans have little to draw on in assembling a civic understanding

of religious diversity. The common understanding of and anxiety about the separation of church and state has left public education almost void of information about religion, with the result is that Americans are simultaneously passionate and ignorant about religion. In a recent PEW study of general religious knowledge, Americans on average were only able to answer 16 of 32 questions, although some groups, including Mormons, Jews, and atheists, scored significantly higher, all averaging about 20 out of 32 (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010). (<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1745/religious-knowledge-in-america-survey-atheists-agnostics-score-highest>). For a complex array of reasons, Americans now receive less formal, structured religious education within their own traditions, and none or next to none in public educational settings. This ignorance creates a void that often gets filled by the values and rhetoric of the surrounding culture.

It should not be surprising, then, to find that when asked to think about religious difference, Americans of many stripes, not just pluralism-affirming spiritual “seekers,” draw upon the language of tolerance, individualism, and equality, often in direct contradiction with the teachings of the religious traditions with which they claim affiliation. Americans overwhelmingly believe that “good people” from religions other than their own can go to heaven—as high as 89% in a large 2007 survey (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 534). What are we to make of such affirmations in the Bible-believing United States, where over a third of the population also reports being born again Christians (ARIS 2008)? Robert Wuthnow’s 2005 analysis of American attitudes to religious diversity is replete with puzzling statistics like this one: [SLIDE 6]. “Fifty-seven percent of “churchgoing Christians said it was true not only that ‘Christianity is the best way to understand God’ *but also* that ‘All religions are equally good ways of knowing about God’” (Wuthnow 2005, 131). He also cites a conservative Christian woman who says of

the Jewish friend whom she believes to be damned, “I respect her and what she believes.” So is this woman an exclusivist, or not? Clearly, there are some riddles to be solved in reconciling these three contexts in order to understand how Americans think of and experience religious difference.

[SLIDE 7] So it was the goal of my 2007 book to explore real interfaith conversations, the mostly quiet, mostly unrecognized efforts of Christian, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and others to understand and collaborate with each other in the shaping of their identities and communities. [SLIDE 8] Looking at national interfaith coalitions, local interfaith councils, interfaith families and online interfaith dialogue groups, I found different kinds of encounter with varied motivations and outcomes, demonstrating that there are multiple ways of being interfaith. In national political coalitions, it means strategic and delicate cooperation to achieve a specific aim—whether mounting a multifaith challenge to the religious right, intensifying political support for the state of Israel, promoting a Bible literacy program in public schools, or raising support for environmental causes—with minimal opportunity for or interest in spiritual dialogue. In interfaith families, it involves daily negotiation, ritual creativity, and deep personal spiritual discernment. In community-based interfaith groups, it means coordinating social service projects and making public space for those of different religious faiths to come together. In cyberspace, whether in dialogue groups or in virtual worlds like Second Life, interfaith encounters are radically democratized and individualized discussions that bring together a crazy-quilt of religious identities, including, notably, many Pagans, who sometimes have trouble accessing more traditional interfaith structures.

This research generally supported the hypothesis that interfaith exchanges will be most sought by individuals with pluralist theological perspectives and by religious groups identifiable

as liberal or progressive. Whether it is an individual initiative to join an online dialogue or denominational affiliation with a community interfaith group, most interfaith programs are dominated by those who affirm that there are multiple equally valid routes to spiritual fulfillment, who are disposed toward openness and tolerance on social issues, and who support liberal political causes. But there are important countercurrents in this pattern. As seen most clearly in interfaith political coalitions, there are conditions under which the most politically conservative and the most theologically exclusivist people of faith are prompted to do the work of interfaith dialogue. Personal reasons can also obviously make it important for those of one tradition to understand and appreciate that of another. At the communal level, too, such projects can serve the needs of religious minorities to educate the wider community about their religion so as to alleviate prejudice and potential conflict. When these motivations are strong enough, these cases suggest, even those whose theology and wider worldview disdain the kind of relativism and counter-culturalism often associated with multifaith work can be inspired to join, or even initiate, an interfaith project. Building on these findings, I'd like to highlight new patterns I see emerging in American religious life and what I think they suggest for new ways of experiencing religious difference.

First, the news. We are nothing if not self-analytical in this country, and so we have plenty of data and analysis pertaining to religious attitudes and behaviors on which to base hypotheses of hope and/or fear. Large-scale national surveys of American religion in the past ten years include the 2002-2003 Religion and Diversity Survey, the 2006 Harvard University Faith Matters Survey, the 2008 American Religious Identity Survey, and the 2008 PEW U.S. Religious Landscape survey. Drawing on these and other, smaller studies we can put together an interesting composite image of who we are religiously in the 21st century. [SLIDE 9]

The first and most obvious thing to draw from all this data is that we are in fact increasingly religiously diverse. Within the very large Christian segment of the American population, there is great internal diversity, of course; different Christian groups accounted for 35 of the 65 distinct groups represented in the 2008 ARIS survey. While non-Christian groups account for only approximately four percent of the U.S. population, they continue to grow, largely due to increased Asian immigration since 1965. The American Muslim population, for instance, has more than doubled since 1990. The religions of these immigrant communities are dramatically reshaping traditional models of interfaith efforts, which used to refer to the work of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews trying to find common ground. Community-based interfaith projects today might involve Hmong elders educating neighbors about their shamanic practices, or Sikhs inviting other local religious groups to help celebrate the opening of a new temple.

A second important trend in American religion in the first decade of the new millennium is, in fact, the move away from religion. The "none" category, those with no stated religious preference, or who are atheist or agnostic now make up 15 percent of the American population, up from 8 percent in 1990. This number is even higher for younger Americans, one in four of whom report that they are unaffiliated with any religion. Of course, not all unaffiliated are confirmed atheists or even agnostics; many may have profound spiritual beliefs and practices that simply don't find any institutional match or need.

Interfaith relations in the United States, both in practice and as theorized, have historically been ordered around differences in religious identity, as largely defined by institutional affiliation, with non-religious folks simply sitting it out. But what if they want in? In Chico I belong to an interfaith group called the "Celebration of Abraham" that puts on an annual dinner to bring local Jews, Christians, and Muslims into conversation. As people arrive,

they are given name tags and asked to place a colored dot on the tag to identify their religious affiliation--red for Christians, green for Muslims, blue for Jews. The idea is then to sit at a table with those whose tags have different colored stickers to facilitate conversation across faith traditions. A few years ago it became clear that we needed another color—we chose purple—not just for the occasional Buddhist who came to dinner, but for those with no religious affiliation who nonetheless wanted to contribute to this community bridge-building conversation. If the survey data is right, we are going to need to make more and more room at our tables for purple dots. How will our analysis and behavior change when we come to see the "nones" as *some things*, or more radically, as human beings with coherent and complex worldviews? Similarly, when I was researching religiously mixed marriages several years ago, I limited my study to partners who were committed to different faith traditions, because it was the domestic encounter with religious difference that I wanted to understand. It never occurred to me study those marriages--*like my own*--in which one partner is religious and the other not. Yet in hindsight I now see that many of the problems, strategies, and outcomes I observed among Jewish-Muslim, Buddhist-Christian, and Jewish-Christian families I met pertain equally among couples who are assembling lives with conflicting religious and non-religious pictures of the world.

We have known for decades now that American spirituality is increasingly detaching from fixed institutional moorings, whether the metaphor is shopping, seeking, or cafeteria noshing, yet most interfaith efforts still define and solicit participation in terms of religious identities, if not congregations. The considerable growth of the "nones," especially among young people, should prompt a reconsideration of this congregational model, and a creative exploration of alternative ways of reaching and serving those who may be motivated to think and

talk and work collaboratively around matters of ultimate concern, but who neither want nor need religious institutions or even theological frameworks to do so.

But what about the very different presence of the so called "new atheists," who seem to want not to come to the table but to destroy it? This is a subgroup of the "nones," less than two percent of the total population according to most surveys, but one that is asserting a powerful presence through public statements [SLIDE 10] like this message that appeared on billboards outside the Lincoln Tunnel and elsewhere this past December and the popular books of what the New Atheists website calls its "four horsemen;" Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. New Atheists, defined more by their assertive anti-religion critique than by anything especially new in their atheism, are collectively calling for a new enlightenment in which reason and scientific thinking will triumph over magical thinking, a commitment to thorough-going secularism will remove religion from the public square once and for all, and, ultimately, we will all come to see the responsibility of religion for human ignorance and atrocity and so leave it behind. Can pluralism-affirming religious people engage this kind of atheism at the table? Should they?

Pluralism at its best does not *deny* difference or insist on universally accepted theological propositions. A pluralist approach to dialogue has never meant accepting a priori that the other's claims are *true*; it has meant accepting that the other is *both* other *and* a potential witness to another face of ultimate reality. And the great success of interfaith dialogues between, say, Christian theists and Buddhist non-theists would suggest that atheism *per se* should not present a special problem. Thoughtful atheist criticism of the failure of many religious systems to come to proper terms with human mortality and finitude, for instance, is the basis of a conversation I for one would love to have.

But the most aggressive stream of atheism often reduces religion illogically and unfairly, setting the worst of the Inquisition against the best of the Enlightenment. Serious religious thinkers should call them out on this, and they are. New atheist criticisms of religion often express quite unsophisticated thinking about religion, defining it exclusively propositionally: religion is the (nonsensical) belief in x or belief that y. If only the illogic of such propositions can be shown, the argument goes, religion will lose its stranglehold on us. But obviously such arguments fail to adequately account for the source of such propositions in religious experience, and the self-conscious awareness of many religious people that the propositions are the always-inadequate expressions of non-propositional truths. In particular, I would argue, they fail to account for the powerful aesthetic dimension of religious experience. Is a TED talk by Sam Harris, however persuasive, really going to dislodge the faith of one person transported by the chanting of Theravada Buddhist monks in an all night pirith ceremony, or the sight of thousands of white-garbed Muslims circumambulating the Kaaba, or an evangelical Christian emerging reborn from baptismal waters?

But pluralists must also be willing to speak prophetically within their own about those doctrines and practices that lend legitimacy to aggressive atheist critiques. And if religious people were more vigilant in defending principles of religious freedom, protecting against the encroachment of religiously based unscientific thinking in scientific domains, and challenging their co-religionists more boldly on gross scriptural misconduct, religious people would become more credible dialogue partners with atheists.

A third trend observable over the past decade is our increasing exposure to and interaction with those who are religiously different from us, what Robert Putnam and David Campbell call religious bridging. [SLIDE 11] The simple presence of increasing numbers of

non-Christians in the country makes this inevitable to some degree. We work in religiously mixed settings, our children go to religiously mixed schools, popular media present us with frequent (and occasionally realistic) portrayals of diverse religious groups. But Americans also experience religious diversity at more personal levels. Just under a quarter of Americans report that their five closest friends all share their religion, and two out of three have at least one extended family member who is of another religion (Putnam and Campbell, 522-23).¹

At the most intimate level of religious interaction, interfaith marriage rates continue to rise dramatically. In 2001, 22% of Americans reported being married to someone outside their own faith tradition. By 2007, the Faith Matters survey found that one third of married American couples were religiously mixed, and fully half were married to someone who came from a different religious tradition (Putnam and Campbell 521-522). My study of interfaith marriages suggests that these are among the most intense and inventive sites of interreligious encounter, with the children of these marriages often embodying fascinating new forms of religious hybridity.

And all of this bridging appears to be good news for pluralism. A study based on data from the 2000 Religion and Politics Survey (Pew Research Center 2000) showed that exposure to other religions, both through personal contacts and attending religious services, tends to make people more accepting of religious diversity (Smith 2007). Putnam and Campbell refer to this as the “Aunt Susan Principle.” [SLIDE 12] They write:

We all have an Aunt Susan in our lives, the sort of person who epitomizes what it means to be a saint, but whose religious background is different from our own. Maybe you are

¹ These rates are not consistent across religious groups, though; Latino Catholics, Mormons, and Black Protestants have a significantly greater degree of religious homogeneity in their family, friends, and neighbors than do Anglo Catholics, evangelical and mainline Protestants, and Jews.

Jewish and she is a Methodist. Or perhaps you are Catholic and Aunt Susan is not religious at all. But whatever her religious background (or lack thereof), you know that Aunt Susan is destined for heaven. And if she is going to heaven, what does that say about other people who share her religion or lack of religion. Maybe they can go to heaven, too. (526)

Their survey indicated that this kind of intra-family religious bridging, as well as the corollary experience of developing a friendship with someone from a different religion (they call it the “My Friend Al” principle) leads to greater acceptance of or warmth toward not only members of Susan or Al’s religious tradition, but to other religious groups generally (532). Unfortunately, both this survey and the study cited earlier about Americans’ beliefs in the possibility of salvation for those of other religions indicate that this warming effect has not reached all religious groups evenly. Muslims, Buddhists, and Mormons received significantly lower “feeling thermometer scores” than other religious groups, though the authors believe these temperatures will rise as these numerically smaller groups’ contacts with others increase. We must hope this happens soon, before too many Qur’ans get burned.

Finally, recent research shows that we are a spiritually mobile people. According to a 2007 survey by the Pew Forum for Religion in Public Life, more than a quarter of Americans—28 percent—report a different religious affiliation from the one they in which they grew up. If switching among Protestant denominations is included, that number goes up to 44 percent. And other research indicates that about one in five of us were actually raised in a religion different from the one our parents inherited, indicating further generational slippage (Putman and Campbell 136). Some of this switching can be accounted for by marriage-related conversions, when one partner changes religious affiliation to join that of his or her spouse. But much of it

represents the efforts of individuals to find better, if often only temporary, institutional fits for their spiritual lives.

For the baby boom generation, leaving the family religion was often a significant and sometimes traumatic act of rebellion. For many younger Americans, the shift to an individualized and protean religious identity involves no such dramatic rupture; they grew up in a context of church-shopping, other forms of spiritual seeking, and hovering about the edges of religious identification. For a growing number of Americans, religious identity is experienced not as a given defined by inherited affiliation, but as personal, eclectic, and portable from one institution to another. [SLIDE 13] And so as we move around among denominations and in and out of religious affiliation, those institutions increasingly lose their power to contain and define American spirituality, as evidenced by the continued growth of nondenominational churches, the growing and vehemently anti-institutional “emerging church” movement, and, maybe more importantly, the increasing number of those who attend denominational churches but define themselves simply as “Christian.” The Constitution’s non-establishment clause did much to establish a competitive marketplace of religious ideas and practices, and so there is nothing new in this idea of religious identity as a matter of conscious and voluntary choice, but subsequent cultural changes and the growing diversity of options among which to choose have intensified the element of choice in American religion—including, as we have seen, the increasingly popular option to assemble eclectic, multireligious spiritualities, or to choose none. What I want to emphasize about this spiritual mobility is that it suggests a declining emphasis on the creedal doctrines that have traditionally posed the greatest challenges in interfaith dialogue (Viteritti, 190).

All of these developments suggest big things for the once narrow area of religious practice and reflection that the word "interfaith" used to circumscribe. In 1965 economist Milton Friedman declared that "we are all Keynesians now" in a kind of template phrase that has also, marking shifts in political empathy, housed Bolsheviks, Americans, neo-cons, Danes, and, as of last month, Wisconsinites. I'd like to put the phrase to more literal use to suggest by way of getting to the "so what" of my presentation, that in fact "we *are* all *interfaith* now." The days in which Americans' religious beliefs, practices, and values were all neatly housed in one religious identity are long gone, if they ever even existed outside the imaginations of theologians and demographers. Especially among young people, who have lived their lives in the context of megachurches with Broadway production values and popular music, Internet, film and television programming that are also purveyors of religious ideas and images, many of which are non-Christian, interreligious exploration requires no formal initiative but becomes a natural complement to other modes of spiritual gathering. For them and many others, "interfaith" is an increasingly more than a description of certain activities, but a plausible religious identity.

It is fitting that in this place where I received my highest academic degree I should come back round to the first thinker who inspired my passion for this subject: Wilfred Cantwell Smith. [SLIDE 14] In 1962, Smith, a historian of Islam and one of the most important theorists of interfaith understanding, made a methodological move that I believe speaks powerfully to what it means to be interfaith today. Smith's aim was to de-legitimize the reified concept of "religions" as separate, static, and competing belief systems, and replace it with the concept of interpenetrating "cumulative traditions," each with complex histories and permeable boundaries. While "religions" have certainly not disappeared from scholarly rhetoric, Smith's insight into the fluid quality of religious traditions and religious experience is a profound one—not yet fully

embraced by the field—and if applied to the current American context—may help us see new prospects for being interfaith.

In the same way that denominations no longer delineate Christian identity, it may be that the colored sticker model of religions as distinct and either/or entities is coming to the end of its usefulness. What Smith most objected to about the category “religion” was its Enlightenment-based elevation of belief over practice and its effect of artificially dividing each such belief system from another. In reality, the internal diversity of each of these traditions and their implication in multiple other cultural systems makes any definition of a single religion problematic. In a recent essay on the rise of global Pentecostalism, Devaka Premawardhana notes that Christians in many parts of the world have experienced religious life this way for centuries—as a living interaction with multi-sourced ritual practices, cosmologies, and ethical and aesthetic systems. “Enslaved Africans, when forcibly transported across the Atlantic, stealthily affiliated their deities with Catholic saints, maintaining continuity with their past despite tremendous pressure to erase it. Even Protestants, heirs to the Reformation emphasis on belief, have been shown to fuse Christian and non-Christian traditions in countries as diverse as Brazil, Sudan, and Thailand” (2011, 32). So while Smith may not have been successful in abolishing the religions-as-competing-belief-systems construct among western academics, the demographic shift of Christianity to the global south may do it for him.

And the developments in American religious life that I have highlighted would seem to suggest that we are moving in this direction on our own. This came home to me as I was reviewing Paul Griffiths’ incisive analysis of religious difference, in which he uses the terms “religious aliens” and “religious kin” to define the relationship between members of different traditions. It struck me as a Christian, though, that I feel far more alienated from many of my

fellow Catholic Christians, in my own neighborhood as well as in the Vatican, than I do from many Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and atheists, who feel very much like kin. In matters of social justice and in a specific kind of sacramental view of the world, I am deeply Catholic. Yet as a woman, a feminist, and a friend of sexual minorities, that identity is alien to me, and I find insight and support elsewhere, from both religious and non-religious sources. In Smith's terms, I am a part of the cumulative Catholic tradition of faith, both because it has shaped me and because I have, simply by refusing to renounce the name, shaped it in some small way. But it would not be accurate to say that my religion is Catholicism.

What I am talking about here is somewhat different from what is called "multiple religious belonging" in theological circles. In that context, it refers to the deep immersion of a member of one religious tradition in the theological and spiritual world of another, to the point at which he or she identifies with both traditions. It is typically used to refer to the spiritual interactions of western Christians and with the religions of Asia, usually monastics or professional theologians. Perhaps because its institutional boundaries are so defined and therefore violable, the Catholic Church has been the locus of much of the theological reflection on multiple belonging. But whether it is being challenged or defended, it is generally agreed that multiple religious belonging is not for the faint of heart, but is rather, in the words of Catholic theologian Peter Phan, "a demanding vocation, a special call to holiness ...not unlike martyrdom" (Phan 77). The reality of overlapping religious identities is actually much messier than this, though, [SLIDE 15] encompassing, as Michelle Voss Roberts has shown, the *plural practices* of non-elites that, consciously or not, engage the practices of multiple religious cultures, as well as the *hybrid identities* of those who, are "at once insiders and outsiders to multiple centers." This hybridity, she argues, "in fact describes all religious subjects insofar as

gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, employment, and sexual orientation intersect with religious identity” (2007, 52) When we define religion in terms of static and self-contained belief systems, such hybridity is both masked and delegitimized. Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s critique of belief-centered concepts of religion here finds common purpose with feminist critiques of traditional modes of interfaith dialogue, in which women’s both/and, insider/outsider identities have never found a comfortable place.

Finally, to see the religious lives of individuals not as fixed by denominational identities or even by coherent doctrinal systems but as shifting patterns of overlapping ideas and practices helps make sense of the perplexing juxtaposition of American affirmations of both pluralism and exclusivism. While it may be shocking for those of us who trade in theological problems to realize, most Americans, it seems, simply do not spend a great deal of time fretting about the salvific status of their neighbors. Religious lives are collections of choices made for a variety of reasons. Our affiliations with different religious groups is likely to have as much or more to do with the aesthetics of worship or opportunities for social service as with doctrinal systems, which may or may not even be understood. Interfaith encounter, then, need not be predicated on common theological assessments of pluralism. Indeed, it need not be faith-based at all.

Paul Numrich has called for something like this in what he calls a “Plan B” for interfaith dialogue, a civic rather than faith-based approach to matters of shared social, if not theological, concern. He notes the Gallup Religious Tolerance Index which has consistently found since 2003 that the largest category comprises those who are friendly toward religious others with a live-and-let-live attitude, but who are not particularly interested in learning more from or about other religions. Numrich argues that this tolerant middle, as well as exclusivists and highly

motivated pluralists, all have a stake in conversations about religious diversity in the civic context. He writes,

A Christian can be a civic pluralist dialoguer—that is, one who takes seriously civic duty, protection of the legal rights of others, and active neighborliness—without being a faith-based pluralist dialoguer. Even a Christian who holds exclusivist views of other religions and chooses not to enter into pluralist dialogue about doctrinal claims can engage religious others in meaningful and productive civic pluralist dialogue (Numrich, Plan B in the Pluralist-Dialogue Approach to Religious Diversity in America 2008).

Given the current tenor of conversations about religion in the public square, I would argue that this ought to be Plan A for interfaith dialogue, with faith-based conversations proceeding as a second order encounter.

At the same time, such a civic pluralist dialogue can open up connections between religious people and humanists, atheists, and others who really should no longer be called "nones." Humanist author and Harvard chaplain Greg Epstein, Internet organizations like the Brights, blogs like Friendly Atheist and Non-Prophet Status, the secular humanist research and advocacy group Center for Inquiry, and the campus group Secular Student Alliance, among many others, have rightfully demanded a place for the non-religious in public conversations about religion; those of us who are religious would do well to do well to engage them, for there are almost certainly aspects of our hybrid identities that overlap. Educational settings are also ripe for civic dialogue about religious pluralism, despite the legacy of schools as culture war battlefields. Model programs like the mandatory world religions course at Johansen High School in Modesto demonstrate that schools can indeed *teach about* religion without *teaching* religion. [SLIDE 16]. Last year I developed an experimental program in my community that offered

young teens-Catholic, Protestant, Unitarian, Jewish, and atheist--an opportunity to explore the world religious and philosophical traditions in religiously neutral space; it was successful beyond my best hopes. And if religious and non-religious kids can work together to understand Islam, Confucianism, and the categorical imperative, surely I can find common ground for an interesting conversation about religion with my son's friend's fundamentalist mother. We are all interfaith now. Seen this way, the non-Christian, the other kind of Christian, the atheist, all become ever so slightly less other. Our circles all overlap somewhere, as mine do with this other mother. We are women who share some religious vocabulary, a community, an affinity for rock music, and the love of our 13-year-old boys. It's a start.

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