Common Ground:

Conversations among Humanists and Religious Believers

Sponsored by the Xaverian Missionaries of the United Kingdom and the United States
The Planning Team for the Common Ground Conference

The Xaverian Missionaries of the United Kingdom
Fr. Tom Welsh – Director, Conforti Institute
Fr. John Convery – Deputy Director, Conforti Institute
Mr. Hugh Foy – Project Manager Programme Development, Conforti Institute

The Xaverian Missionaries of the United States
Fr. Carl Chudy – Provincial
Mrs. Mary Aktay – Communications Director

The Xaverian Missionaries UK
Conforti Institute
Calder Avenue
Coatbridge, Scotland
ML5 4JS
www.confortiinstitute.org

The Xaverian Missionaries USA
12 Helene Court
Wayne, New Jersey 07470
www.xaviermissionaries.org

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction 3

2. 6 Tips for Christians on Talking to Non-Christians by Chris Stedman 7

3. Searching for Common Ground: The “Commonness” in the Ground by Fr. John Sivalon, MM 11

4. A Secular Hindu Speaks of the Importance of Interfaith Cooperation by Prerna Abbi 21

5. Religious and Non-religious Engagement: Common Ground Rules by Dr. Maureen Sier 31

6. Common Ground: Conversations Among Humanists and Religious Believers by Fr. Carl Chudy, SX 35

7. Reflecting on our Common Ground by Sister Isabel Smyth, SND 41


9. Time for Humanists, Secularist, and Atheists to Engage in Interfaith Dialogue? by Gary McIleland 48
INTRODUCTION

Why Catholics need to be involved in conversation and collaboration with our brothers and sisters who are humanist and atheist stem from how we understand our gospel commitment. New appreciation on this came from the historic opportunity of Vatican II which impelled the Church to consider how we live out our mission in a growing secular culture as well as in the extraordinary influence of a multi-religious world. The Council spoke to a sense of disjunction between the Church and the modern world more than forty years ago and the possible ways to re-think how we navigate in this complex plurality with the guidance of faith. It was during the Council that Pope Paul VI published his first encyclical; Ecclesiam Suam (His Church) in 1964 that birthed the “magna carta” of Catholic dialogue. The following year, he created the “Secretariat for non-believers” (which in 1988 became the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with non-believers), as a focal point for the dialogue with those of good will who profess no specific religion. He said in Ecclesiam Suam (His Church):

“God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. “He first loved us.” We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with (humanity), without waiting to be summoned to it by others... Our inducement, therefore, to enter into this dialogue must be nothing other than a love which is ardent and sincere. [Dialogue] is demanded by the dynamic course of action which is changing the face of modern society. It is demanded by the pluralism of society. Moreover, the very fact that [we] engage in a dialogue of this sort is proof of [a] consideration and esteem for others, [an] understanding and kindness. [God] detests bigotry and prejudice, malicious and indiscriminate hostility, and empty, boastful speech. Speaking generally of the dialogue which the Church of today must take up with a great renewal of fervor, we would say that it must be readily conducted with all of good will both inside and outside the Church.” (Ecclesiam Suam 72, 77, 78, 79, 93)

More recently, Pope Francis made it clear that we need to be in dialogue with those who do not share our own religious beliefs for at least two reasons. The first is to overcome the breach that exits to some extent between the Church and culture. If the Church is interested in evangelizing culture, than understanding that culture through
dialogue is absolutely essential, particularly dialogue with secular culture, a value that all faiths, as well as many humanists and atheists find challenging. The second reason is reflected in The Joy of the Gospel #257:

“As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation.”

It is in this light that we engage ourselves in the important conversations that need to take place between religious and non-religious. In the last 40 years or more, where dialogue is understood as crucial in universal church teaching, our ability as leaders to bring these important assumptions of contemporary mission into the hands of local church leadership, families and mandated organizations in the pews have been less than stellar. It is in these local family and community realities where the “rubber meets the road” as it were and where guidance and resource for individuals navigating our diverse world is most needed. It is on the local level where culture is transformed. The gap that still exists often between universal teaching and what occurs in local parishes and communities has handicapped efforts enormously in the real needs of the mission of the church in many places worldwide and perpetuated outdated notions of what mission is today in the minds of ordinary Catholics that have hampered zeal and new creative outlets. It is in this context that the Xaverian Missionaries wishes to bring whatever fruits of the COMMON GROUND PROJECT are possible to the service of local churches and secular communities, a dialogue of life.

The Xaverian Missionaries, an international religious missionary congregation, has been focusing more and more on the important challenges of interfaith dialogue and intercultural dialogue in the 21st century global mission of the Church. Along these lines exchanges between believers and non-believers are seen as vital. How do we as a Church meaningfully connect with this world, live in solidarity and collaboration in justice and peace? The Common Ground Project was born in the midst of this international discernment about the contemporary mission of the Church in a world where a pluralism of faiths and convictions abound. The Xaverian Missionaries of the regions of the United Kingdom and of the United States embarked on a fortuitous project to gather religious believers and humanists in a respectful exchange and dialogue in order to map out some of the delineations of a common ground where we all stand together, despite our differences. It took place at our Mission Education Center in Coatbridge, Scotland, Conforiti Institute on November 8-10, 2013 with almost fifty participants from the humanist communities, Muslim, Christian, and Baha’i faiths.

We invited Mr. Chris Stedman, Humanist Chaplain of Northwestern University and Yale University in the USA, whose latest book, The Faitheist, reflected so well this growing desire in the humanist and atheist communities to participate in this dialogue
with religious believers, particularly among the millennial generation. Fr. John Sivalon, MM, a Catholic missionary priest with the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers also joined us as one of the speakers. John’s latest book, *God’s Mission and Post Modern Culture: The Gift of Uncertainty*, aptly shows how important it is for religious believers to see the positive elements of secular culture as important opportunities to share our lives of faith. In dialogue with each other we heard from both Chris and John why it was so important to be together in this conversation from their humanist and religious believer point of view.

We also asked Dr. Maureen Seir of the Scottish Interfaith Council to share with us her own convictions about theist/atheist dialogue through her long experience in interfaith dialogue and as a member of the Baha’i faith. She comes from the perspective of a non-religious background growing up and moving toward the Bahai Faith. Ms. Prerna Abbi, of the Interfaith Youth Core in the United States, considers herself a secular Hindu, and exemplified the contemporary tendency to take on hybrid identities that could be both religious and secular at the same time, showing poignantly how the common ground in religious and secular worlds plays out in many individual lives and how important these connections really are.

Professor Callum Brown of the University of Glasgow in Scotland, himself a humanist, shared with us the latest in his research in the United Kingdom, United States and Canada on why people lose religion. His insights and interview driven research a number of moving accounts of people who move from being religious to non-religious and to what they feel fulfills their lives. Unfortunately we could not obtain a written text of his lecture for this publication but we were able to get his permission to share with you a YouTube presentation of the same lecture given elsewhere. See the video here. (http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xuxl2f_professor-callum-brown-how-do-people-lose-religion_school)

Finally, we are very grateful to Dr. William Storrar of the Church of Scotland, Director of The Institute for Theological Inquiry on the Princeton University campus, Princeton, New Jersey USA, who so ably facilitated the entire conference in order to provide an atmosphere that allowed theist/atheist dialogue to blossom, inspired by the thought provoking presentations of our speakers and the dialogue among the participants. Throughout our days together we planned opportunities for the participants themselves to be in dialogue with one another during breaks, meals and in an afternoon long session of Open Space where the participants themselves would name topics they wanted to dialogue more on contributing tremendously to the rich conversation that laced the entire conference. We attempted to widen the audience by a government sponsored panel discussion held in the grand Scottish House of Parliament where others from the public were invited to attend.

The presentations and participant reflections in this journal (from four humanists and four religious believers) each in their own way, seek to attend to the lives and burdens...
and hopes that characterize human life in a world often broken but unforgotten, in
trail but moving toward the freedom promised both by a faithful Creator and by
sheer human hope. They are all also a profound reminder that healing the world is
done together on our common ground.

Finally, each of these presentations and reflections unearth and provoke important
questions for further dialogue, reflection, prayer, and action.

- There is a new openness in the humanist/atheist communities and among many
  religious communities. It is not consistent in either where many other humanists
  and religious persons do not see any purpose to this dialogue. However, the seeds
  have been sown for a new kind of conversation and perhaps concerted action. How
do we bring this commitment back to our own associations, churches, synagogues,
mosques and temples? How do we engender a deep desire for this dialogue among
our own communities? What are the opportunities? What are the stumbling
blocks?

- Many are no longer connecting themselves with traditional institutional religion
  but they do value aspects of it. They may choose some aspects of their family’s
  faith as well as other convictions from a humanist point of view for example.
Hybrid religious identities are being formed that see no contradiction in the
practice of some religious practices as well as humanist values and convictions.
How do understand this new development and its impact in our communities? Are
they new opportunities to reach across religious and humanist boundaries? How
could this be done in your community? How does this collaboration impact us all?

- In the separation of religious and spiritual identities among many of the millennial
  generation which separates them from their family religious traditions and
institutions, personal notions of spirituality of crafted around personal preferences.
They are free of external authority or tradition. This tendency to define spirituality
on the basis of subjective feelings and a kind of “moral” therapy without service of
others or engagement in a community of faith or human conviction remains a
challenge. How do we all meet that challenge from our unique points of
view?

- The experience of the LGTBQ (Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-gender, queer or
questioning) has enormous impact on the faith choices and human convictions of
many of our brothers and sisters. Often in traditional faith communities, the
LGTBQ communities are alienated. How do we bring our faith communities and
human organizations to be more inclusive, loving, accepting, and cognizant of the
wealth of hope available when we all find ways to meaningfully connect with one
another?
6 TIPS FOR CHRISTIANS ON TALKING TO NON-CHRISTIANS

Speaker Presentation: Chris Stedman

Chris Stedman is the Interfaith and Community Service Fellow for the Humanist Chaplaincy at Yale University, assistant chaplain at Harvard University and author of The Fatheist: How An Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious. He is the managing director of State of Formation, a new initiative at the Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue. Chris received an MA in Religion from Meadville Lombard Theological School at the University of Chicago, for which he was awarded the Billings Prize for Most Outstanding Scholastic Achievement. Chris is the founder and author of the blog NonProphet Status. He is a panelist for The Washington Post On Faith, and his writing has also appeared in venues such as Tikkun Daily, The New Humanism, and more. Chris is a secular humanist working to foster positive and productive dialogue between faith communities and the nonreligious.

Surveying the world today, it’s clear Christianity is at a crossroads: Christian communities are undergoing some radical shifts, and the number of non-religious people is growing rapidly as Millennials leave organized religion en masse. (Nearly one-in-three U.S. citizens under the age of 30 identify as religiously unaffiliated today, and the majority of them say they’re not looking for a church or religious community.) Simultaneously, conversations about social issues like gay marriage and abortion are advancing in new ways all around the world.

As someone who lives in the tension of my evangelical past and atheist present, and as someone who maintains abiding and mutually inspiring relationships with Christians, I understand that many of my Christian friends are trying to discern how to navigate these swiftly changing times. And I definitely empathize with their frustrations over the less productive exchanges that often occur between Christians and non-Christians.

I’d like to humbly suggest six ways Christians might have more constructive conversations with non-Christians. Of course, not all of these suggestions will apply to every Christian, and many of them could apply to any group of people (including atheists — something I regularly acknowledge and confront in my own community, and discuss at length in
my book *Faitheist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*. But perhaps some of this will resonate with you.

Since I am no longer a Christian, I offer these ideas with several grains of salt. I acknowledge their shortcomings as generalizations, their incomprehensiveness, and my status as an outside observer of Christianity. There are as many expressions of Christianity as there are Christians, and this is a short and simple list. A great many Christian friends enrich my life, and I hope none of them — and none of you — will be offended by anything I suggest below. Instead, I hope for, and welcome, a discussion about them.

1. **Drop the stereotypes.**

If you want people to see you as more than just your label, you're going to have to do the same for them. Not just when it's easy — when people seem to be similar to you — but in every case. Just as there are Christians who promote hateful ideas, there are atheists who treat religious believers with closed-minded prejudice, hatred, and who make dialogue difficult. But many atheists also view religion with more nuance, and have a deep moral commitment to pluralism and equality. You probably know some personally, whether you realize it or not.

In each religious or nonreligious category, many different kinds of people exist. But because we live in a society that associates religious differences with conflict — very often mean-spirited or violent conflict, at that — it's important to be patient and compassionate whenever possible, and to allow people to speak for and define themselves. This is perhaps especially true when trying to navigate seemingly irreconcilable differences. After I became an atheist, I struggled to talk with Christians in a constructive manner. But once I was able to drop some of my assumptions and stereotypes, I found these discussions got easier.

2. **Don't try to "win" the argument.**

This is a tough one for those of us who love a spirited argument. (I grew up with three siblings close in age, so I was trained to treat it as a sport.) But a little intellectual humility can go a long way — particularly when trying to discuss difficult issues. Debates often descend into shouting matches where neither side is listening or trying to understand, but is instead attempting to defend a position. Whenever possible, try to see things from the other person's point of view and empathize with their perspective, even if you don't think it's legitimate. Ground discussions in the interpersonal instead of merely in the theoretical. Share personal stories that relate to your beliefs, and communicate in a way that shows you're not trying to compete, but to relate and learn. Make space in the conversation for two distinct people with two distinct points of view. Show up not to lecture and argue, but to learn and actually listen to and respond to what the other side has to say.
In Faitheist I tell a story about the time my friend Amber, who is a born-again Christian, first expressed her desire to see me come back to the church. I know her faith is an important part of her life, and she knows I derive a sense of meaning from being an atheist. Because we have a trusting, close relationship, we are able to discuss these differences honestly, openly, and without getting defensive.

3. **Speak for yourself.**

One of the pervasive stereotypes about Christians, and evangelicals in particular, is that they’re insincere. This may seem to contradict the idea that many people see Christians as generous and charitable. That may be true, but many people also see Christians as having — at least on occasion — a hidden agenda.

In some cases, this is conversion (see #6). But there’s more to it than that. Sometimes, Christians are seen as more interested in being an ambassador for Christianity than simply being a person interacting with another person.

I don’t mean to suggest you shouldn’t be honest about the centrality of your faith in your worldview, or that you should divorce yourself from your beliefs. Honesty and integrity are important in interfaith conversations. But a more robust conversation can unfold when you seek to find the intersections between your beliefs and experiences and another person’s, and when you speak for yourself instead of on behalf of all Christians.

4. **Highlight the diversity among Christians.**

Fair or not, many non-Christians’ primary exposure to Christianity comes by way of a conflict-driven media that would rather highlight the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) protesting at a military funeral than a church that operates a nightly soup kitchen. Unfortunately, the loudest voices tend to overshadow more nuanced ones. I find this in my own community with prominent atheists like PZ Myers, who said in a public discussion with me that religious people “have something profoundly wrong with their brains.” Just as PZ Myers doesn’t represent me, the hate-filled WBC doesn’t represent the Christians I know.

Because of the media’s focus on conflict, in the eyes of many — particularly among young people — Christianity is often seen as equivalent with exclusionary politics and policies. I was raised in a politically progressive household, and I remember feeling like I couldn’t talk about my political leanings once I became an evangelical Christian. Creating more space for various expressions of Christianity, and demonstrating that Christian communities can be a welcoming place for people with alternate viewpoints, will go a long way toward deconstructing (the obviously unfair) conceptions of Christianity as one-note.

5. **Acknowledge privilege and don’t try to force others to live by a certain moral code.**
Though the number of people who do not affiliate with any religion is growing rapidly, Christianity is still the norm. Even as the United States grows more pluralistic, it remains a highly religious society, and the number of atheists among the nonreligious is still quite small. Atheists are regularly ranked among the least trusted and least liked groups in the United States. Theonormativity, or the normative assumption that people believe in the Christian God, pervades our society. Appeals to God proliferate political discourse; even our currency states "One Nation Under God." (For a recent example of this, check out the Center for Inquiry’s new report on religious fundamentalism in the U.S. military. http://www.centerforinquiry.net/advocacy/for_god_and_country_religious_fundamentalism_in_the_u.s._military/)

I remember, as a Christian, feeling like I was in a persecuted minority — but, in fact, Christian influence on culture is, in many parts of the United States, inescapable. Try to imagine, if you can, what it would feel like if Christianity were truly in the minority like atheism is. Imagine how you would feel if, instead of hearing President Obama make references to God and Jesus in speeches, he spoke about how what unites us as Americans is that we don’t believe in God. Christianity and belief in God are normative in the United States and in many parts of the world, and people who deviate from the norm are often marginalized or the target of explicit discrimination. In addition to recognizing the benefits you receive by being a Christian, embrace secularism, which does not mean the absence of religion from society, but that government doesn’t favor certain religious beliefs over other (religious or nonreligious) beliefs. Freedom of religion is the backbone of a civil society. You are free to disagree with others’ choices, and to say so, but all citizens should be granted equal rights.

6. Talk — and listen — to people about more than just their salvation status.

I understand this is a tricky issue, especially if evangelizing is a cornerstone of your faith. I have Christian friends engaged in interfaith dialogue, and they have told me that, to them, such work is still evangelizing: but instead of proclaiming the word and leaving it at that, they are modeling God’s love for all people.

Recently, I participated in an interfaith dialogue with a Catholic priest, who responded to my bristling at evangelizing by saying:

“But, Chris, it strikes me that the problem there is with the definition of evangelization. If we think of that word as a synonym of hectoring and finger wagging and a holier than thou attitude, I completely agree with you. But what if evangelization is itself a mutually enriching dialogue in which the promises of the Church (that is, of Christ) are put forward as proposals, as encounters, not as edicts? Then we are taking about the manner, not the fact, of evangelization, aren’t we?”
He is absolutely right. This is a distinction that I am hearing articulated more and more often by members of religious communities that see evangelizing as central to their faith — and it is one I welcome with gratitude. Maintaining a general orientation toward encountering diversity with inquiry and empathy, rather than lecturing at it, can facilitate a more productive dialogue. That will require listening from both sides and recognizing we have much to learn from one another. For starters, perhaps we can learn how to talk to, and listen to, one another in a more constructive and friendly manner.

The divide between Christians and atheists is deep. As an atheist, I’m dedicated to bridging that divide — to working with other atheists, Christians, and people of all different beliefs and backgrounds on building a more cooperative world. We have a lot of work to do. I’m excited by the growth of the interfaith movement — but still, in many ways, we have our work cut out for us. My hope is that these tips can help foster better dialogue between Christians and atheists and that, together, we can work to see a world in which people are able to have honest, challenging and loving conversations across lines of difference.
Searching for Common Ground: The “Commonness” is in the Ground

Speaker Presentation: Fr. John Sivalon, MM

Fr. John Sivalon, MM is a Maryknoll Missioner ordained in 1975. Following ordination Father Sivalon was assigned to the Africa Region where he worked in the Musoma Diocese in Tanzania. During his pastoral work in the Africa Region he was also appointed Justice and Peace Coordinator. Father Sivalon earned a Degree in Political Science from the University of Dar es Salaam in 1980 and earned his Doctorate in Theology from the University of St. Michael’s College in Toronto, Ontario, Canada in 1990. After finishing his studies, Father Sivalon returned to the Africa Region and his work in the Archdiocese of Dares Salaam. He was appointed Regional Superior of the Tanzania Region in 1995 and again in 1998 when the newly formed Africa Region was established. Father Sivalon continued as a member of the faculty of the Department of Sociology at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania until September 2001. From 2001 - 2008 he served as Superior General of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. He is presently a visiting professor of theology and religious studies at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania.

In this encounter of humanists and believers, I have been asked to reflect on why it is that we as Christians are called to be here. The invitation was tendered to me because of some reflections that I had made in my book, God’s Mission and Postmodern Culture: The Gift of Uncertainty. I wrote that book in the context of my perception that my own denomination, Roman Catholicism, was becoming increasingly negative about Western culture, to the point of almost demonizing secularism. Since publication of the book, a shift seems to have taken place with the election of Francis as Bishop of Rome. I believe that much of what I will say here today is much closer to the attitudes and perspectives that Francis has exhibited in terms of his openness to the other, his openness to the world and his decrying of a church that has become increasingly self-referential. However, I come to this encounter not as an official representative of the Roman Catholic church or its positions, but as a person whose journey through life has been formed by my Christian faith and the encounter with diverse and
varied cultures, which has, for me, raised a variety of questions.

At the start of my Maryknoll ministry, in 1972, I walked into a world in Tanzania, East Africa, which seemed so unfamiliar and extraordinary. Houses were roofed with thatch; men were walking around with beer straws made of reeds; young men and women were being circumcised shortly after puberty; extended families were celebrating feasts with sacrifices of cattle, dancing and other religious rituals to mark the entrance of old men into elderhood; and churches were filled with young and old, men and women, all vibrantly celebrating their faith. I had stepped into a “culture of enchantment,” as some refer to it: a world with an unquestioned belief that the space around us is peopled by material and spiritual beings and that a unitary life force unites all of these beings in such a way that a mutual and reciprocal dynamic exists among them. In that world, it is believed that what you do in the physical realm affects the spiritual, and the spiritual can as easily affect the physical. Thus, to talk about the secular in this world made no sense.

A few months short of thirty years later, I returned home to the United States and found myself in an almost equally peculiar and wondrous culture. People were talking to and texting one another almost incessantly, yet they seemed oblivious to those in their actual physical presence; popular culture appeared outrageous as images of the hyper-real dominated; young people spoke openly about their sexual orientation and their sexual experiences; greed and the super-accumulation of wealth seemed normative; the world, with its diversity of peoples, cultures, languages, goods and services, was present in the local; and, most astonishingly, churches seemed curiously empty and almost totally devoid of young people. Where had they gone?

When I left for Africa, a popularized version of secularization theory forecast part of this phenomenon. It hypothesized that the effects of the culture of enlightenment would eventually erode religious consciousness or at least privatize it. Reason and empirical data would rule the day and religions would disappear or become a personal emotional element. Now, though, the dynamic seems much more complex and varied. In some parts of the world, the above prediction has almost played out, while

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1 This anecdotal statement is supported by the Pew Forum Religious Survey of 2008 which states, “the group that has experienced the greatest net loss by far is the Catholic Church. Overall, 31.4% of U.S. adults say that they were raised Catholic. Today, however, only 23.9% of adults identify with the Catholic Church, a net loss of 7.5 percentage points. How can this decline in the percentage of Catholics be reconciled with the findings from the General Social Surveys that show that roughly the same proportion of the population is Catholic today as was Catholic in the early 1970s? Part of the answer is that the Catholic Church has also attracted a good number of converts. But the main answer is immigration. The many people who have left the Catholic Church over the years have been replaced, to a great extent, by the large number of Catholic immigrants coming to the U.S.
in other parts, the opposite is true. Religions have surged into prominence.

As I became more reacquainted with my home culture, I came to see that the issue of whether or not religion would become obsolete wasn’t necessarily the question. I realized that my observations of what was happening around me really only scratched the surface. A much deeper set of values had been assimilated by people over time and had become a culture. While some believers decried this culture as opposed to their belief and proposed strategies for the re-Christianization of Western culture, I was moved to recall from my African experience the basic missionary principle that “God was there—in that culture—long before I arrived.”

Logically, this principle moves one to a position of listening rather than imposing and of discovering rather than declaring. It goes back to the earliest expressions of our faith, which have remained a centerpiece of our Christian understanding: Creation, with its historical and cultural expressions, is the first expression of the voice of God.

Thus, unless God has jumped ship in Europe and North America, as a believer I understand this culture in which we live as revelatory of a God who communicates. I believe that in examining its deeper values, believers and nonbelievers are able to discover our common ground. Some of these deeper values, which I would like to highlight as central to our discussions here, are: the gift of uncertainty, the celebration of diversity, the intimate relationship of all things to one another, and the real “ground” of our commonness: learning to live into the mystery of our returning to the “ground.”

**Uncertainty**

The culture in which we live is characterized by many of these features: a historical consciousness—deeper and more radical than in earlier ages—of the continual evolution of our knowledge; an appreciation of pluralism that is suspicious of all absolute or universal claims; a consciousness of the social construction of all knowledge and understanding of reality; and a sense of the size, age, complexity and mystery of reality that early science never suspected.

In other words, a growing number of people have come to see how once unquestioned worldviews and paradigms have been proven wrong. The earth was once accepted as flat. We once thought that the universe circled around the earth. Then we learned that the earth isn’t even the center of our own galaxy, let alone of the universe. We thought the universe would begin to contract but now see it as potentially expanding forever. Because of this historical consciousness of our knowledge, a very real skepticism has come to permeate how we look upon truth claims and knowledge itself. Likewise, we have come to accept not only that human beings are formed by

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socialization but that all reality and how we perceive it is in some way socially constructed. Our culture is further characterized by a sense of pluralism in which the only acceptable meta-narrative is that there is no possibility of a meta-narrative that can explain all things for all time and for all peoples. Nothing is absolute or set in stone and everything depends on one’s particular frame of reference.

These principles were reinforced and moved to a much deeper level by developments in the physical and social sciences that began to emerge in the early twentieth century. Particle physics has made clear at least two propositions which have reinforced a culture of acceptable pluralism and healthy skepticism of absolutes. First, a certain level of randomness exists in which subatomic particles act differently than our common perception of medium-sized simple objects such as golf balls. Second, the observer effect at the subatomic level limits certainty to at best statements of probability and not statements of absolute truth.

In the social sciences, Chaos Theory has led us to the assumption that not only is understanding biased by perspective but, more importantly, absolute truth is impossible because the social world is so complex that we can never wholly grasp it and, also, at its deepest levels it displays randomness, which makes it simply unpredictable.

Among the revelatory elements of our culture, the one which I as a believer think is essential is this “uncertainty.” For some, uncertainty denotes ambiguity or confusion and so is seen as a source of anxiety and tension. But what if, instead, using the lens of our culture we see uncertainty as a reality that marks the social and physical world and as such a gift. For one thing, uncertainty is the ground of questioning. It leads the curious to ask: why we are doing this; what should we do; or how is it best done?

More importantly, the gift of uncertainty brings us all to the common table knowing that no one of us has all the truth, all of us are searching with good will, and that we are searching for answers to the deepest questions about who we are as human beings. It is the gift of uncertainty that has brought us together in this gathering, with a renewed sense of searching together in the “ground” of our culture for our commonness and our survival.

**Celebrating Diversity:**

This naturally leads, then, to the question of how I as a believer understand the “other?” And I will offer my conclusion first, that the “other” is not an opponent with whom we Christians need to contend or to negotiate a peaceful coexistence. Rather, the “other” is an intimate and integral part of who we are and who we say our God as Trinity is. Thus, for believers in the Trinity, diversity should be celebrated and nourished.

For a Christian believer, the mystery of the Trinity is not just about unity, it is...
also about the “threeness.” Borrowing from Derrida, the concept he calls “differance” brings a fresh perspective to understanding of this “threeness.” In describing this concept of “differance,” two different senses are highlighted. “Differance” refers to understanding meaning by way of contrast:

What gives a term positive meaning is a contrast—a differential that is necessary to the meaning. . . . This “outside” operates as a foundation of sorts by holding concrete meaning in place,...

For example, we understand tall as not being short, green as not being red, and a chair as not being a table. This is “differance” as difference. However, “differance” introduces to this idea the notion that contrast is not only productive for defining what a thing is not but it also accentuates remaining open to our understanding of a phenomenon or relationship of phenomena as becoming more than it is. “Differance” carries with it the temporal idea of “differing,” “Differance” “defers” a certain way of understanding a phenomenon in order to remain open to there being more.

For example, with regard to gender or sexual orientation, “differance” would lead us to recognize that while there are real differences in how people perceive themselves, no gender or sexual orientation can negate any of the others. They do help us to understand by way of contrast, the other, but “differance” also pushes us to always remaining open to the possibility of there being more.

Thus, as a believer in God as Trinity, I believe “differance” relates to the mystery of the Trinity. It helps us understand the importance of the persons in defining each as different and in their reaching beyond themselves by deferring closure. This openness to “being more,” deferring closure, for us Trinitarian believers, is what ushers forth creation with all of its diversity, plurality and complexity.

This understanding of the Trinity opens to us Trinitarian believers, the possibility of believing in Divine life without feeling the need to homogenize creation. In David Cunningham’s words, “In the postmodern era, such “differance” has reemerged as something for which human beings can rejoice and be thankful, rather than something that needs to be subordinated to an all-embracing desire for uniformity.”

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me to be who I am. Thus, we should be at this common table searching for our commonness—not our “sameness.” Our commonness should not devalue our “otherness” but rather celebrate it as essential to who we individually are.

**Relationality**

As we become increasingly aware of our diversity and difference, at the same time, and maybe because of that awareness, we also become increasingly aware of our connectedness to one another. While globalization may not be a new phenomenon, in its present form it has led to an unbelievable compression of space and time. This is true in all fields, but is most dramatic in the economic, communication and cultural fields. Economies can no longer be understood as purely national entities and crises need to be managed now by an ever increasing number of international organizations and groupings. With the growth of social media and other forms of communication we often know more about what is happening half way around the world than we do about our own neighborhood. And fashion, music and art travel back and forth on the cultural highways of the globe.

Using analogies from the realm of science, we can imagine this growing depth of interconnectedness and oneness that exist among us because of the processes of globalization. For example, in the realm of particle physics, this can be seen in the relationship of the observer to phenomena. Secondly, it can be seen in the unity expressed in wave-particle duality. Finally, it is most mysteriously exemplified in the relationship expressed as entanglement.

The theory of unity of subatomic elements called wave-particle duality says that these elements are neither particles nor waves but, rather, exhibit properties of one or the other (without being either) based on the way they are observed.

Investigations on the nature of light showed that, depending on the kind of experiment performed, light must be described by electromagnetic waves or by particles. Thus the wave aspect appears in the context of diffraction and interference phenomena, whereas the particulate aspect shows up most distinctly in the photoelectric effect.

Therefore, a subatomic element observed in a particular way and in a particular context exhibits properties of a wave sometimes and a particle at others. The intimate relationship of the observer and the instruments of observation to the observed is a reflection of the depth of relationship approaching unity that we can see in

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our modern world. What any one of us does inevitably impacts the other.

Even in modern science, especially the social sciences, an observer effect is discussed. However, the observer effect in the social sciences was limited to the observer’s perception of reality being affected by the observer’s attitudes, values and biases. It was limited to subjectivity. In particle physics and later social sciences, the observer effect is understood as much more radical, active and objective on the observed. There is a radical connectedness between the act of observing and the observed.

This idea of radical connectedness is further imaged, again by analogy, by the notion of entanglement:

In physics though, it (entanglement) refers to a very specific and strange concept,... Once two particles become entangled, it doesn’t matter where those particles are; they retain an immediate and powerful connection that can be harnessed to perform seemingly impossible tasks.... At this quantum level, it is possible to link particles together so completely that the linked objects become, to all intents and purposes, part of the same thing. Even if these entangled particles are then separated to opposite sides of the universe, they retain this strange connection. Make a change to one particle and that change is instantly reflected in the other(s) however far apart they may be.7

Imagine two or more particles linked together so that one can no longer be adequately described without full mention of its counterpart even when light-years apart. They have become so entangled with one another that they continue to be correlated to one another in their behavior, as if they were one object.

These analogies allow us as Trinitarian believers to understand “relationality” as a much more radical sense of oneness. They add a sense of depth to the words of Jesus’ prayer “that they may be one, as we are one; . . .” Regardless of the processes of globalization, we Christians are driven by our faith to appreciate the oneness that exists among us all. It is not just a relationship that is mutual and reciprocal between distinct entities but, rather, it is a relationship of oneness that says, no matter how different we are, we are still one. This was most profoundly exemplified by Pope Francis when he condemned the “globalization of indifference” and the “culture of well-being,” that makes us insensitive to the suffering of others.

As believers and humanists alike we come to this table with a radical sense of the interconnectedness of our lives in the social and physical world. Anything I do and any choices I make have an

effect on you through the most direct or indirect and obscure socio-economic and cultural networks, and the same is true for anything you do or the choices you make. While we remain different, we are at the same time so intimately interconnected that we are nearly one.

Whether we choose to encounter one another or not, we will encounter one another and are encountering one another. Thus, in coming together in this conversation, we do so not to add an encounter but to search for ways to foster the encountering that is taking place so that it will lead to all of us flourishing in those encounters of life.

The “ground”

Most Christians see Jesus of Nazareth as central to God’s revelation and the salvation narrative we have constructed over centuries. In that narrative, we understand the paschal, or life-through-death, mystery of the cross described in the Gospels as the central event of Jesus’ life. It is deemed the fullest, clearest and most profound window we have into the heart of God as Trinity. While it is commonly claimed that postmodernity and our culture is deeply skeptical of any overarching or meta-narrative, one event that postmodern philosophers agree is universal to humans, at least for now, is the centrality of death and more specifically, our consciousness of it. Jacques Derrida described the “gift of death” as a central event that is the basis for our singularity and individuality and therefore our personal responsibility and freedom. He

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8 Roger Haight, “Trinity and Religious Pluralism,” in Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 44:4, Fall, 2009. In this article Haight talks about the Trinity as narrative also. However, there is no doubt that he would see the presentation I am making here as too “Christocentric” to be relevant to postmodern culture and an understanding of religious pluralism. He would emphasize that Jesus reveals the way God is and the way God acts generally. “It is according to God’s nature to self-manifest to and enter into dialogue with human beings. If God is to be known with any specificity, not merely as the vague object of an impulse or desire on our part, God must be revealed in particular contexts, symbols, places, events, and persons. . . . God can be and is revealed within the finite symbols of this world. . . . Therefore, other persons, other books, and other histories provide vehicles for God’s ‘appearing to’ and thus defining a people religiously.” p. 537.

9 The four gospels clearly present the passion, death and resurrection as the centerpiece of their narratives. There is a growth in emphasis on the resurrection with the historical evolution of the gospels from Mark to the Gospel of John. For Paul there is absolutely no doubt that the central mystery of the Christian Way is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

10 Jacques Derrida was born in 1930 in Algeria, which was then French Algeria, to Jewish parents. He is often referred to in the context of post-structuralism and postmodern philosophy. He wrote more than 40 books. After a long career of teaching and public speaking, he died in 2004. Allan Megill in Prophets of Extremity, says that “Derrida renders explicit and obvious an attitude pervasive in modernist and especially in postmodernist art. Thus, his writings can help us come to grips with a large part of twentieth-century aesthetic consciousness.”(p. 261) I believe that this claim can be extended to include the central values of postmodern culture as described in this book. He writes in a long line of “postmodern” philosophers that stretches from Nietzsche (1840 -1900) to Levinas (1906 -1995).

developed this further as the grounding for philosophical ethics and the foundation for the living of a truly human life. Even though, he makes it clear that Christian revelation is unnecessary for him to arrive at this conclusion, Derrida, uses an Abrahamic image to develop his thesis.

Reflecting on the story of Abraham in the Book of Genesis, Derrida, uses an Abrahamic image to develop his thesis.

It is finally in renouncing life, the life of his son that one has every reason to think is more precious than his own, that Abraham gains or wins. He risks winning; more precisely, having renounced winning, expecting neither response nor recompense, expecting nothing that can be given back to him, nothing that will come back to him, he sees that God gives back to him in the instant of absolute renunciation, the very thing that expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit and how? Will there even be any heirs.”

12 Patocka was a Czech philosopher (1907 – 1977) who struggled with whether or not to become a Christian. Patocka wrote on the decline of technological society. Derrida says that Patocka’s thesis is “that technological modernity doesn’t neutralize anything; it causes a certain form of the demonic to re-emerge. Of course, it does neutralize also, by encouraging indifference and boredom, but because of that – and to the same extent in fact – it allows the return of the demonic.” Patocka goes on to talk about the effects of this on personal responsibility for our actions. The individualism of Modernity misrepresents the unique self as a unique role rather than a person. “A persona and not a person,” he says.

he had already, in the same instant decided to sacrifice. It is given back to him because he renounced calculation.13

Even though he denies the need for revelation in order to arrive at his conclusion that renouncing life leads to gaining life, Derrida stresses that Christianity itself has not taken seriously its own central revelation nor the radical implications of it.14

Derrida’s challenge to me and all of us who struggle to understand our Christian faith in our culture is to study more deeply the central message of the narrative we embrace. He forcefully implies that an atonement, or transactional, understanding of the cross bears no credibility in postmodern culture. Nor, however, does defining the cross away as an unfortunate consequence of a prophetic life, have significance from the point of view of his thought. Rather, Derrida implies that the lens of postmodern culture, which sees death and our consciousness of it as the central mystery of who we are as human beings, will allow us to find in the


14 Ibid. p. 6. My understanding of this is that Patocka looking at the history of religions (but basically he is talking about Christianity) claims that religion (Christianity) has been defined by an emotional effervescent experience of the Other that he calls demonic or orgiastic. He stresses that this demonic relationship to the Other grows out of the frightening reality of the core revelation of Christianity about death which human beings do not want to accept and do not want to reflect on.
central Christian mystery of the cross a new richness.\textsuperscript{15}

Derrida also answers the critics of our culture who claim it to be a sea of relativism. He insists that meaning, morals, ethics, freedom and responsibility do have a grounding in postmodern culture — “the gift of death.” Meaning comes from learning to live into this mystery or, as the title of the last interview with Derrida manifests, from “Learning to Live, Finally.” or, as Jesus said, “No one takes my life from me but I hand it over.”

Humanists and believers alike are going to die, that is the “ground” of our commonness. Embracing that reality relativizes even ourselves and opens us to potentially living our lives as described above with uncertainty, celebrating difference and diversity, recognizing how intimately related we are to one another and to all of creation, and breaking through the fear of death in order to love.

**Conclusion:** In coming to this common table, I affirm that our Christian vision grows out of our Trinitarian belief and includes solidarity and community with God and all of creation, by recognizing the absolute necessity of the “other,” of diversity and of complexity. Therefore, I propose that we Christians dialogue with others so that we might more clearly know who we are. We dialogue with persons of other belief systems to help ourselves to better understand our faith and to live it with more authenticity. But most importantly, we dialogue with others so that, recognizing the grand diversity among us all, we might more clearly appreciate and glorify that diversity and complexity that we believe emanates from within our Trinitarian God.

This implies that we join in this conversation as, in our language, a “pilgrim people” who are journeying and searching with “uncertainty.” We are a pilgrim people who by our very faith in a Trinitarian God, whom we understand as the author of all creation, are moved to accept otherness and diversity both within our own community and outside of it.

The fear of death and the associated fear of vulnerability and uncertainty is expressed in a very real fear of intimacy with one another. At the foundation of our fears and failures in relationships and dialogue is the very real resistance to accept our own mortality, vulnerability and fragility. At the foundation of our fears and failures in relating to the “other” is our very real resistance to embrace “learning to live, finally:” finding our commonness in the “ground.”

\textsuperscript{15} David S. Cunningham book review of The Gift of Death by Jacques Derrida in *ATR*, Vol. LXXX.1 pp. 1279. Cunningham remarks, “When a non-Christian philosopher of great erudition pays close attention to theological questions over which Christians are manifestly divided, we should probably pay attention. . . Derrida scales Mount Moriah, but not Golgotha. And yet, this philosopher has always been better at leading theologians to see the Promised Land, rather than dwelling there himself.”
A Secular Hindu Speaks of the Importance of Interfaith Cooperation

Speaker Presentation: Prerna Abbi

Prerna Abbi has been involved with the Interfaith Youth Core since 2008, serving as a member of IFYC's Fellow's Alliance, leading a session at IFYC's Leadership in a Religiously Diverse World conference, and mentoring emerging interfaith leaders through IFYC's Better Together campaign. After graduating from Syracuse University in 2009 with a BA in Political Science and International Relations, Prerna spent two years as an AmeriCorps member, serving as a volunteer coordinator with Habitat for Humanity, an ecumenical Christian nonprofit that assists families in need to achieve affordable housing. She is particularly passionate about including the voice of the nonreligious, like herself, in interfaith work. Prerna currently works on staff with Interfaith Youth Core.

I am thrilled to be here with all of you. The organization I work for, Interfaith Youth Core, or IFYC, is working hard at increasing interfaith cooperation amongst college and university students in America, and it's so exciting to see this convening of great minds who can make this a reality in Scotland. The title of this gathering, common ground, is something I care deeply about. But, as someone who is nonreligious, interfaith work has been both scary and alienating and warm and welcoming. We're all here because we strive for the latter. Finding that common ground can be challenging, but I think it is well worth the work.

I grew up with Hindu parents who were both immigrants from India. My dad’s side of the family was pretty dogmatic — practicing rituals without necessarily understanding the reasons for them. My mother’s side of the family was more relaxed — the way my mom explained it, god would hear and accept her prayers regardless of whether or not she was sitting in a temple at a particular time or if she made the right offering. My brother and I were raised with a combination of both, influenced heavily by the fact that we didn’t actually have a community of either. Growing up in suburban New York, there weren’t very many Hindu people
at the time, so anything we learned we picked up directly from our family.

I knew pretty early on that I was agnostic about god and divinity, but there were a few things about religion that really fascinated me. I always wanted to know more about the communal aspect of being a member of a faith group, and the direction it could provide for its practitioners. As I grew older, I came to understand that I loved observing these things and learning more about them because they were the things that I was seeking in my life.

These days, I call myself a Secular Hindu. I am nonreligious. I don’t practice rituals that I don’t understand as practical, and while I do think there is room for possibility, I do not actively believe in a divine power. Rather, I believe that the power is within us to respect, protect, and love each other — and that is actually something that I pull from my Hindu roots. I call myself a Secular Hindu because while I’m not performing pujas, or rituals, Hindu philosophy does inform the way I see the world. Hinduism is where I found the calling, or direction, I was seeking.

As a teenager I went to a Hindu summer camp for a few weeks, and it was there that I learned about the concept of Karma Yoga. In Hinduism, there are different paths to salvation, called yogas. There is physical yoga — hatha yoga — what you think about when you think “Downward Dog.” Other yogas include knowledge and ritual, but Karma Yoga is the path of service, the belief that you will find yourself through helping others. It put words to something that I had long believed, and gave me footing for what I still try to live out in my personal and professional life.

My Hindu background didn’t provide much help in finding community, though. That’s not to say that there aren’t vibrant Hindu communities, because there most certainly are. They just weren’t a good fit for me. I tried Unitarian Universalist churches, and found one that I really liked in New York, but I moved to Chicago shortly after and have yet to find one that feels good for me.

Currently, I’ve actually found community through my partner’s religious tradition. She is an Evangelical Christian, and after several weeks of “church shopping” we found a place that fit our needs — a place that was welcoming and affirming to people holding all kinds of identities, a place with a contemporary worship style and a modern praise band, and a place living out the value of social justice. We attend church together most Sundays. Sara often volunteers as a communion server, and I bake for the hospitality committee. We take time to talk about the sermons and how we do or do not seem them as applicable to our lives and how we can live out the lessons learned Monday through Saturday. And we both sit on the social justice committee. Together, we’ve served meals to homeless youth, advocated for prison reform, and fought back against violence towards women and girls. Most importantly, it’s been a space for us
both to engage some of our strongest values, values that we share.

Now I'm certainly not advocating that choice for everyone. Being a member of a religious community as a secular person would not work for everyone. I am fortunate that this particular community welcomes and appreciates my presence, and I happen to like it there, but that is not to say that other secular folks would necessarily feel at home in such a space, or would even want to try to begin with.

I currently work at Interfaith Youth Core, or IFYC, in the US, and I first came in contact with the organization through a fellowship with them in 2008. At that time, I still wasn’t quite sure how I identified religiously and I hadn’t yet taken on any secular labels. I was swimming around “Hindu-ish” because I didn’t know what else to call it. At the time, IFYC and other organizations were questioning whether or not their definition of interfaith cooperation should make space for the nonreligious. IFYC decided that it did, and today many of my colleagues there, and the students, faculty, staff, and alumni that we work with do identify as nonreligious.

This is recognition of the fact that nonreligious people, just as religious people, are intentional and moral. We hold humanitarian values too, and if the intention is to establish a better, more peaceful society, then nonreligious people can and should play a role in that process.

At IFYC, we know that we live at a time when people of different faith backgrounds are interacting with greater frequency than ever before. We hear the stories of people who seek to make faith a barrier of division or a bomb of destruction all too often. We view religious and philosophical traditions as bridges of cooperation. Our interfaith movement builds religious pluralism, and we define that in three parts: respect for people’s diverse religious and non-religious identities, mutually inspiring relationships between people of different backgrounds, and common action for the common good. I think having respect for people’s identities is pretty self-explanatory. It means that you can bring your full self to the table, no need to dilute what you believe, because the point is not to walk away with a sense that we all believe the same thing. We most certainly do not. But, we can be mutually inspired by each other. My colleague, Amber, and I run IFYC’s Alumni program together. She is a born again Christian; and I am secular. I don’t share Amber’s faith, but I’m inspired by her drive to increase interfaith cooperation, and I can work with her, in common action, towards a goal that we both share.

I put all three of these factors into play when, immediately after college, I spent two years serving as an AmeriCorps member, which is essentially Peace Corps within the US. For those two years, I worked as a volunteer coordinator for Habitat for Humanity. If you aren’t familiar with Habitat, it’s a nonprofit that was actually created as a
Christian ministry. The founders, Millard and Linda Fuller, were actually quite wealthy, but they were on the verge of divorce so they sat down to talk about their problems. They realized that they were both so unhappy because they felt like they had been swallowed up by materialism and had somehow abandoned the Christian principles they grew up with. They gave everything away and moved to a communal farm in rural Georgia, where they witnessed the incredible poverty that they never knew existed in America.

Now I had known for a very long time that Habitat was building homes around the world, but it wasn’t until I started working there that I learned that the Fullers founded Habitat for Humanity based on important Christian principles, inspired directly from the Bible. Habitat follows the Christian calling to put faith into action, bringing people together to make affordable housing and better communities a reality. And they emulate Biblical economics by giving without seeking profit through donations of money, supplies, and labor, Habitat is able to give their homeowners interest-free mortgages. And that grounding in the Bible for the organization at large and for many of their individual employees was something I came to really respect and admire. To me, it is incredibly wonderful that this couple recognized that they had strayed from their values, and not only did they come back to their Christian faith, they used it as the springboard for creating an organization that to date has helped over 600,000 families. Knowing that made me want to be part of their work even more.

Now, I can’t say that I directly inspired the Fullers, but I know that they were inspired by the people who wanted to partner with Habitat, regardless of their faith backgrounds. Millard Fuller called this the Theology of the Hammer. As he said, “We may disagree on all sorts of other things, but we can agree on building homes with people in need.” And that is exactly what IFYC means by common action for the common good.

IFYC has chosen to focus our work on American college students, supported by their campuses, developing them into the interfaith leaders needed to make religion and philosophical identities a bridge rather than a barrier in America. You can look at inclusive interfaith work within American higher education as a microcosm of interfaith work at large, and what we see is, it is not easy. When the Yale Humanist Community was recently denied their application to join Yale Religious Ministries, our friend Chris Stedman wrote that this “is still an emerging conversation... on building relationships with religious groups, learning from them, and educating them about who we are, what we believe in, and why we seek this kind of recognition and collaboration.”

And we recognize that it is a continuing conversation. After multiple attempts over several years, a group for secular students was finally approved at
Concordia College in Minnesota this past spring. Concordia is affiliated with ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the administration felt very strongly about adhering to Lutheran values. Previous attempts at starting the group had veered away from humanist values and appeared to be anti-theistic, leaving a bad taste in administrators’ mouths. But this new group was founded not in attacking other religious groups, but in being a parallel — a place for nonreligious students to find community and explore and live their values, and also a place for others to learn about and engage with the secular community. In the end, student leaders actually believe that the group was approved due in part to the support of Christian leaders on faculty and staff at the College.

Many of those leaders cited the shared values that they saw within the community. As I was preparing to come here, Mary Aktay said anecdotally that she feels as though Christians and Jews may be able to engage in interfaith dialogue once they understand the commonalities that their faith traditions share, but when it comes to expanding that dialogue circle to including the humanists... people are dumbfounded! What do those nonreligious people have in common with us? What can we even do together? Why does it even matter?

Helping religious communities to understand the value of including humanists in their interfaith work is only the beginning. The reverse is also true. It can be difficult to help nonreligious folks feel comfortable in interfaith work too.

For lots of reasons, including my studies and the people I hold close relationships with, I feel comfortable working with and amongst religious folks. But it is a struggle for many secular people. It’s certainly one that I’ve felt in the past. I know I’m a good, moral, ethical person, but I have spent a lot of time worrying...if I don’t have a spiritual home, or if my spiritual foundation is not rooted in god, will people be able to see the values that I share with them?

That fear is reflected in fact. A Gallup poll last year found that Americans are uncomfortable voting for an atheist. When it comes down to voting for our President, Americans more likely to vote for candidates identifying as Muslim, gay or lesbian, female, Hispanic, Jewish... based solely on nonreligious identity, atheists are considered the least electable group in America. There is currently only one elected Congressperson who identifies with “none.”

Obviously, this place that one label of “nonreligious” above all else, which is dangerous territory. As we flew here from Dublin, John and I were talking about how it may just be more scary to have a conversation with someone who shares your religious label than with someone who doesn’t. There are countless ways that people under one umbrella term disagree, and humanists are no different.
One of IFYC’s central ways of training interfaith leaders is through our Interfaith Leadership Institutes, three day conferences that equip students and their staff and faculty allies with the knowledge and skills to begin building a campaign of interfaith pluralism on their campuses. Our most recent Institute was attended by a delegation of students from the Humanist group at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Afterwards, they published a blog piece called “Three Atheists Walk Into an Interfaith Dialogue...” highlighting their unique reactions to the conference.

One student reflected on his personal conviction of separation of religion and science, and how this is grounded in the thought that actions speak louder than words, He said that because of this conviction, he would “be happy to prove that (he) support(s) people of all religions having their own beliefs and working together,” and said that he subscribes to beliefs that promote peace among those who disagree, and only to challenge ideas that are bigoted, misogynist, or hateful.

Another student disagreed with IFYC’s model of interfaith dialogue, which focuses on individual people present, rather than asking people to represent or speak for their tradition at large. He felt that it didn’t leave enough room for robust debate, which was what he was seeking.

A third student said that he believes in the “secularization of...culture and institutions.” He did not think that his atheist identity could be seen as analogous to a religious identity, and felt that interfaith work in general represented some of the things he was intentionally avoiding in being an atheist.

All three students are active members of the Humanist group at Rutgers. But their thoughts on interfaith work vary greatly. They disagree on whether or not they feel welcome within interfaith work, whether or not they feel compelled to participate, and whether or not it was important. That is to say, just as no one Sikh person can speak for or represent the opinions and beliefs of all Sikhs around the world, people who identify as nonreligious differ as well.

There are, however, some things that you can do to make interfaith work more inclusive and welcoming for people who are not religious. It isn’t foolproof, it still won’t suit everyone, as we saw with the group from Rutgers, but it can help open doors for people need to feel just a little more comfortable before leaping into interfaith work.

One frequent obstacle is language. To begin with, even the term “interfaith” connotes that one must ascribe to a faith tradition to participate. If a person identifies as a humanist or nonreligious person or atheist, to name a few labels, it’s understandable why they might be hesitant to jump on board with something that seems to exclude them even in the name. You could choose a
Pennsylvania, instead of “faith” they call it “Spirituality and Meaning Making Programs.” Truth be told, that kind of resonates with me, but it sure is a mouthful and it probably doesn’t look too great on a flyer. “Interfaith” is a word that people are becoming more and more familiar with. Its meaning is relatively understood, which makes it a strong candidate to stick with. But that means that it is important to be aware of how nonreligious people may feel and to be ready with an explanation of how you are not trying to exclude them — you can say that your group is inclusive to all religious and philosophical backgrounds, or that you welcome religious and nonreligious folks alike, or that any worldview is welcome.

Another factor to keep in mind is purpose — at IFYC, student groups are charged with organizing common action toward a common good. Reasons for participating in said common action, like collecting supplies for the local homeless population, will likely vary from individual to individual. Some of those reasons will be deeply rooted in faith, but the action itself is a secular one. Coming together on an important action item is something that many secular people will feel comfortable with.

Another issue that humanists encounter when entering into relationships with people of faith is addressed by Chris’s colleague at Harvard Humanist, Greg Epstein. He wrote a book called Good Without God, which really gets to the heart of Humanism and its positive belief in tolerance, community, morality, and good without having to rely on the guidance of a higher being. And while I know those things to be true, he needed to write that book because it wasn’t obvious to many people, but the reverse is also true.

Just as a religious person may have trouble seeing the values that a secular person could hold, a secular person might have trouble seeing the values that religion might instill in people. As I said, I’ve been agnostic for a long time, and when I was younger, I really thought of religion as a security blanket. I saw it as something that gave people comfort and meaning in times of loss or hardship, but not much else.

That changed when I was in middle school. I had made a new friend, Marin and she was the first person I met who was Jewish. She and her family went to a reform temple nearby, and when we were hanging out she would invite me to come along to some of her youth group events, things like dances and movie nights, all non-religious things. I always had a good time meeting her temple friends so one day, after working together on a school project, she invited me to go to the Peanut Butter & Jelly Gang. Neither one of us was entirely sure what that meant, but I tagged along with Marin and her mom to their temple, where we walked into a gymnasium full of people standing on makeshift assembly lines, making sandwiches and putting together hygiene kits for people in need in our community.
I really loved it because even as a kid, service and volunteering were really important to me. I distinctly remember how happy everyone was to be there. And I didn’t catch on at first, but I eventually realized that they were there because of their faith. To the people around me, Judaism wasn’t just a comfort in times of sadness; it was what brought everyone together on that day to serve our community.

As the people around me explained the significance of Tikkun Olam, the Jewish call to heal the world, I gained a new sense of appreciation for Marin and her religious community, and I began to see religion in a new light. In all honesty, that moment changed my life in so many ways that I couldn’t ever have imagined at the age of 13, and Marin and I were just joking about that the other day when I told her that I was going to share this story here. But it truly was a stepping stone that opened me up to learning and growing alongside my peers of faith.

In the end, including the nonreligious in interfaith work isn’t about agreeing to disagree or ignoring our differences. It’s about acknowledging our differences while engaging our shared interests and values. So how can we do this? IFYC believes that pluralism is achieved by two things: the science of interfaith cooperation and the art of interfaith leadership.

Social science data tells us that by creating positive, meaningful relationships across differences, and fostering appreciative knowledge of other traditions, attitudes improve, knowledge increases, and more relationships occur. These three are mutually reinforcing, and we call this the “interfaith triangle”.

The scholars Robert Putnam and David Campbell call this the “My Pal Al” effect in their book American Grace. They give the example of a beekeeper who is skeptical about Mormons. This person has a pal, Al, who is also a beekeeper. These two people are friends. They enjoy their shared hobby. And, it turns out, Al happens to be Mormon. Putnam says that studies show that although the beekeeper was previously skeptical about Mormons, upon learning about Al’s religious affiliation, her opinions about Mormons at large would shift. Actually, it turns out that not only would the beekeeper become more tolerant of Mormons, but if Al was one of her closest friends, she would become more tolerant toward all religions.

Seems silly, right? But I’ve actually seen it to be true, with my own partner. Sara grew up in rural Texas, in a fairly homogenous town and worked for a Christian organization where most people shared the vast majority of their religious beliefs. Before moving to New York, Sara hadn’t known anyone who called themselves a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Humanist, but she opened herself up to meeting and learning more about the diversity around her. Sara grew up in a place where it wouldn’t be uncommon to hear someone say that a nonreligious person is amoral and condemned to a life of sin and
wickedness. The only way to be good was through god. But Sara doesn’t feel that way because she sees the way that others live moral lives. I actually watched her tell her twin sister that a person who may not share their Christian beliefs has just as much propensity to live an ethical, honorable life.

So how can we activate this formula? The answer is the art of interfaith leadership.

I really love the story that Chris Stedman tells. To summarize it quickly for those of you who weren’t there, he had just closed out one of his very first speeches, and he was proud that it had gone well. The room emptied out, and finally there was just one girl left. She approached him and, slightly shaking, with her eyes gazing downward, she told him “there’s a demon inside you who’s making you gay.” And instead of responding with sarcastic ridicule or lecturing her, he thanked her for being brave, recognizing how difficult it is to tell someone something that you think they need to hear, but that they don’t want to hear. And he told her “I suspect you’re telling me this from a place of care and concern for me well-being.”

In that moment, Chris was practicing the art of interfaith leadership. The reaction that he had opened a door for that girl. As he said, her mind likely wasn’t changed, but his compassion allowed her to have a conversation with him, to have a positive interaction with a queer atheist. And somewhere down the road, that moment may turn into a stepping stone.

The art of interfaith leadership is in the creation and the fostering of opportunities for positive knowledge and engagement that help move people around the interfaith triangle, which is what will ultimately lead us to a community marked by pluralism.
Religious and Non-Religious Engagement: Common Ground Rules

Speaker Presentation: Dr. Maureen Sier

Dr. Maureen Sier is Development & Education Officer of The Scottish Interfaith Council and member of Baha’i Council for Scotland. Interfaith Scotland provides a forum for people from different religions and beliefs to dialogue with one another on matters of religious, national and civic importance. Director at The Scottish Inter Faith Council Development and Education Officer at The Scottish Inter Faith Council. She studied at the University of Aberdeen and also served as lecturer at the University of Samoa. She says: “I have a vision of a world where everyone has an opportunity to develop their full potential. The work I do in interfaith dialogue is a small step towards that vision. My current objective is to continue assisting Scotland to be a welcoming place for people whatever their religious or cultural background.”

Background

Scotland has a long history of interfaith engagement. Formal interfaith engagement began in the 1970’s with the creation of the first local interfaith group, Glasgow Sharing of Faiths. Further local interfaith groups emerged in the following decades and in 1999 a national interfaith body came into existence, initially known as The Scottish Interfaith Council it has recently transformed into Interfaith Scotland. Interfaith Scotland currently exists to;

1. provide a forum for the Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh religions to dialogue with one another on matters of religious, national and civic importance
2. support wider interfaith dialogue with other religion and belief groups as appropriate
3. promote educational activities in connection with interfaith relations
4. encourage civic engagement by religious communities in Scotland
5. support religious equality in Scotland

It is in the context of wider ‘dialogue with other religion and belief groups’ that Interfaith Scotland is delighted to engage with humanists, secularists and
atheists and sees this dialogue as playing an important role in ensuring that Scotland is a just and inclusive country that promotes dialogue and civic engagement whether you have or have not religious beliefs.

The current membership structure of Interfaith Scotland includes faith communities, local interfaith groups, educational organisations and individuals from a very diverse cross-section of Scotland. We hold seminars, conferences and dialogue events for women, young people, religious leaders, faith communities, local interfaith groups and wider society and have developed interfaith resources to assist communities and individuals to engage in interfaith dialogue.

Naturally we do not do this work in isolation and we work in partnership with many organisations such as the Scottish Government (our key funders), Police Scotland, NHS Scotland, Education Scotland, Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure Scotland, The Scottish Refugee Council and the Council for Ethnic Minority Volunteers. We will also be entering into a partnership with the Conforti Institute to continue this important dialogue between the religious and the non-religious.

**Personal Story**

The first few presentations at this seminar have been stories of people moving from a religious standpoint to a non-religious one. Often the stories have included the pain of being mistreated or misjudged by religious hierarchies and occasionally stories have touched on the personal struggle of leaving behind a religious world view.

My story is a movement in the opposite direction. I was born into a non-religious household. Although my upbringing did include being sent to a Church of Scotland Sunday School this was more a cultural than religious undertaking. My father worked in Africa and without necessarily being conscious of it racism was an accepted part of working class life in north east Scotland in the 50’s and 60’s. Gender equality was a thing unheard of and there was very little awareness of religious traditions outside of Christianity.

By the time I was a young teenager in the 1970’s I was asking the big questions, what is life all about, is there a God, why am I here etc. I started to look at Christianity a bit more seriously, even becoming a Sunday school assistant, I started to do yoga and became interested in Hinduism and Buddhism and more and more I felt that my parents were mistaken in not believing in God.

When I first came across the Baha’i Faith, in 1976, I found myself readily embracing it. A religion that challenged racism, that taught that the spiritual truths of all the world’s religions were equally valid and that encouraged equality of opportunity for women and men helped me to challenge some of the cultural assumptions of my parents and in fact the social milieu that I had inherited. I found moving into a
religious world view liberating and life enhancing and also enjoyed the added bonus of a world-wide community of people who felt the same way.

I think it is vitally important in seminars where dialogue between the religious and the non-religious takes place that participants acknowledge that just as some people have found religious world views inhibiting others have equally found a religious world view liberating. It is indeed a fundamental human right to freely choose to follow ones conscience in the area of religion and this is enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 18.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

In engaging in dialogue remembering this declaration may prove useful.

**Common Ground Rules**

Organisations have sprung up internationally, nationally and locally to support interfaith dialogue and engagement and these organisations have naturally developed an expertise in how to undertake meaningful dialogue. In the process of engagement some useful ground rules have emerged that again might prove helpful in the context of dialogue between the religious and the non-religious. The points below have been adapted from the Interfaith Network for the UK’s ‘Building Good Relations’ document.

Dialogue needs sensitivity, honesty and straightforwardness, this means:

- Recognising that listening as well as speaking is necessary for a genuine conversation
- Being honest about our beliefs and religious/non-religious allegiances
- Not misrepresenting or disparaging other people’s beliefs and practices
- Correcting misunderstanding or misrepresentations not only of our own but also of other faiths/beliefs whenever we come across them
- Being straightforward about our intentions
- Accepting that in formal dialogue meetings there is a particular responsibility to ensure that the religious/belief commitment of all those who are present will be respected

**Belief in Dialogue**

Members of Interfaith Scotland, in partnership with the Scottish Government Equality Unit, faith community and humanist representatives created the document ‘Belief in Dialogue’ that everyone at this seminar has a copy of (see Interfaith Scotland website [www.interfaithscotland.org](http://www.interfaithscotland.org) for web copy of the document). This document is perhaps unique in the fact that it
emerged from meaningful dialogue and consultation between religious and non-religious representatives. It is worth sharing the vision of this document and holding it in our minds and hearts as we continue the journey of dialogue between religious and non-religious individuals and organisations. ‘Belief in Dialogue’ states that;

- We share a common humanity and concern for the future of our world, beyond our differences
- Beliefs are important elements of a person’s identity
- People have the right to speak from their value base when contributing to civic life
- Different religions and non-religious beliefs are to be respected as part of the diversity of society
- People are interconnected in a way that makes them inter-dependent
- There is a need to listen to one another for the sake of the common good

**Conclusion**

Sadly some of the worst atrocities committed against humanity have been motivated by strongly held ideologies, these include massacres that have occurred because of religious beliefs but have equally been perpetrated (particularly in the 20th Century) by people holding strongly held beliefs that included wiping out a specific religious community or suppressing religion generally. Just recently I have had the honor of working with Arn Chorn Pond from Cambodia who survived the genocide there. Under the communist Khmer Rouge religion was banned, all leading Buddhist monks were killed and almost all temples were destroyed. Sadly the story of Cambodia is not an uncommon one and similar tragedies occurred in China, Russia, Tibet and Eastern Europe — millions died simply for holding religious beliefs.

Equally there are inspiring stories of inter-religious organizations helping to stop civil wars and using the wisdom of diverse religious traditions to rebuild broken communities. In the book ‘Peacemakers in Action’ (The Tannenbaum Centre for Inter-religious Understanding) the stories of these inter-religious organizations and the work they have done to bring peace is well documented.

In conclusion it is important to ensure that; the religious and the non-religious stand as equals in the process of dialogue; that it is vital to ensure that the tragedies of the past, whether inspired by religious or non-religious conflict, are learnt from; and that together, through dialogue and engagement, humanity can find a better way to ensure the protection of all human rights including the right to freedom of conscious.
The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas delivered a speech in 1947 entitled: “Beyond Dialogue.” At that time he felt that the term dialogue between persons of different faiths and convictions had become a compromised idea, akin to a feel-good word used by estranged groups that had no real intention of understanding one another. In 1947 Levinas was thinking about exchanges between Jews and Christians. However I think Levinas’ thinking applies well to the tradition of interfaith and intercultural dialogue, not only between persons of different faiths, but in our day with those who consider themselves humanists, atheists, and agnostic. He says when estranged groups go beyond superficial dialogue, their rivalrous relationship dissolves. Even more: true dialogue reveals what the rivalry covers up, a state of mutual need and responsibility. For him, authentic dialogue partners relate as healers of each other’s hurts and inadequacies. But fear and ignorance of each other makes us resist such vulnerability. The solution is simple: take the risk.

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16 Arnett, Ronald C., Beyond Dialogue: Levinas and otherwise than the I-Thou. John Benjamins Publishing Co., March 2012. This essay examines the interplay between dialogue and alterity, outlining Emmanuel Levinas’s unique contribution to the study and practice of human dialogue, whose differences with Martin Buber texture an enlarged sense of identity associated with the notion of dialogue.
What We Tried to Do

The Xaverian Missionaries of the USA and the United Kingdom joined together with a dream project in mind: creating a safe and deferential space where religious believers and humanists could come together in friendship, dialogue respectfully with each other, listen and share in order to find some common ground and solidarity. We hoped it to be an opportunity for those who participated to bring this spirit of dialogue back to their own organizations, churches and mosques in order to find ways to do good together. Audaciously we hoped that people of all faiths and convictions could find common ground in our residence on this planet cherishing the values of justice, compassion, reconciliation and more. Going even further, the hope of this dialogue project was indeed to expose our need for each other, and our responsibility to each other. Perhaps too our own convictions and beliefs could be enriched and deepened, with an expanded view of humanity and the good we are called to do.

Why We Tried to Do This

Our commitment as Catholics to share our lives and the faith that we so deeply hold is done in dialogue in a very pluralistic and diverse world. We live shoulder to shoulder with people who not only consider themselves Catholic and Christian, but people of many faith traditions and those who hold no faith at all. Many do not believe God exists. We as Catholics are urged to find ways to understand this diverse human community through organized meetings and exchanges with humanists and atheists.17

The second aspect that is important to keep in mind is that these exchanges and dialogues must focus on grassroots communities and not only among leaders of faiths and humanist organizations. If we are to have an impact on the culture we live, our exchanges must “involve the whole people of God.”18 In this sense it is important for ordinary Catholics in the pews to understand how we live our faith in communities where not all share the same faith or convictions, live in solidarity with peoples who do not reflect our own faith tradition, and pass on our faith to our younger generation in this challenging environment. In a true sense, the younger generation needs help to navigate this pluralistic world through the eyes of their faith. It requires a great patience and wisdom, openness of heart, and an informed sense of our Catholic and Christian tradition, as well as a healthy sense of apostolic daring. Fundamentally, the impact of our faith in the cultures we live must be characterized by our desire to avoid “our sacral and secular isolation “from one another.”19

Our Communities are Both Religious and Secular

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18 John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, 54
19 Benedict XVI
The place of religion in our societies has changed profoundly in the last few centuries. What these changes mean—of what, precisely, happens when a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God becomes one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is only one human possibility among others. Charles Taylor, Canadian philosopher, in his book, A Secular Age, examines the development in "Western Christendom" of those aspects of modernity which we call secular. What he describes is in fact not a single, continuous transformation, but a series of new departures, in which earlier forms of religious life have been dissolved or destabilized and new ones have been created. As we see here, today’s secular world is characterized not by an absence of religion—although in some societies’ religious belief and practice have markedly declined—but rather by the continuing multiplication of new options, religious, spiritual, and anti-religious, which individuals and groups seize on in order to make sense of their lives and give shape to their spiritual aspirations.20

Fr. Robert Schreiter, a theologian who teaches at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, spoke to religious leadership among men in the US recently on the challenges we face today in the task of the Catholic called the New Evangelization. He said that a narrative that held sway through much of the twentieth century was that the privatization of religion would result eventually in religion’s disappearance altogether. Today, however, it is generally accepted that the picture is more complex. First of all, societies become secular in very different kinds of ways. The most telling example is the difference between much of Europe and the United States. In Europe (especially in central and northern Europe) religion has dwindled in presence in societies. In an equally “secular” United States, however, religion continues to be a vigorous presence.21

Fr. Schreiter adds that this has resulted in a discussion of a “post-secular” society. The term has come to have many meanings. In all instances, however, it does not mean that secularization is going to disappear. In fact, even thoughtful religionists would not want a number of very positive dimensions of secularity to go away, such as the emphasis on human rights, democracy, and an array of freedoms for the individual and for groups. What is most often meant by “post-secularity” is that religion will come to take its place in some manner alongside secularity. It will most likely not be the institutional presence that it held previously. There is recognition that, in many ways, secularity is a product of Christianity itself, and therefore as “relatives” the two need to find a way to live together.22


21 Schreiter, Robert. The New Evangelization as a Road to a New Catholicity. Talk given at the Conference of Major Superiors of Men on August 8, 2013 in Nashville, Tennessee.

22 Ibid
The Impact of this Dialogue on our Churches and Organizations

One of the remarks that surfaced consistently in our Common Ground conference among humanists and religionists was that it seemed easier to find ways to dialogue among religious believers and humanists because we all believed this dialogue was important to undertake and came to the conference for that explicit purpose. This in fact was one aspect of “common ground” we all found. We all need to be in this dialogue relationship. That conviction that we all saw so apparent in our conference is in fact not shared at all with many of our colleagues, friends and fellow believers. In some ways, for theists and atheists, the necessity of this dialogue and collaboration is still new.

It seems that the concerns of the Catholic Church’s participation in this dialogue are little understood by Catholics, particularly among some bishops and clergy and those pastoral agents that work more closely with parishioners. Using the image of breathing in and out, this dialogue reaches out to our humanist and atheists brothers and sisters and the fruits of this dialogue are brought back into our churches and organizations where the very faith and human convictions we all represent become reasons to work together. The goal of this dialogue is inspire more people to be involved and create ever new opportunities of exchange and collaborative service, a proliferation of dialogue is what is required to break down the walls of intolerance and the lack of understanding between us.

The Pontifical Council for Culture of the Roman Catholic Church created a program, already underway in parts of Europe called Courtyard of the Gentiles through the direction of Benedict XVI. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Council says this: “We wish to broach a dialogue, maintaining ourselves sturdy in our territories, but respecting the identities. It is the place to search for common itineraries, without shortcuts or distractions or disturbances, in which listening becomes fundamental in spite of the differences.” For Catholics, we have far to go and much to do to allow this concern of the Church to be internalized in the plans of the new evangelization in each and every diocese, particularly in Europe and the United States.

Where to From Here

Since the conclusion of our conference there has been further reflection and discussions that are spurring more opportunities for this kind of dialogue. There are new agreements for more of these collaborative exchanges between the Xaverian Missionaries of the United Kingdom through our Conforti Institute and the Interfaith Council of Scotland. Our Common Ground Twitter feed (https://twitter.com/secreldialogue) is alive with discussions on how humanists and religious participants are trying to keep this dialogue going through their own organizations. Those following our Common Ground blog
allow us to share conference and post conference reflections for a wider audience.

The Xaverian Missionaries of the USA hope to hold a similar dialogue gathering somewhere in the United States in collaboration with the American Humanist Association and their local affiliations, as well as the broad spectrum of religious traditions that make our country so rich culturally. We are also charged with the publication of an e-journal that helps us share the fruits of our Common Ground conference with the hopes of encouraging more of these types of opportunities. We hope to have it published by the end of February 2014.

One of the first lasting impressions of this conference was this special gathering itself and the enthusiasm and hopeful expectation that all of the participants brought from their own life convictions and faith traditions. It was thought important that we are in this conversation in the first place. Each of the talks of our esteemed speakers from Scotland and the United States centered on why they thought we need to be having these kinds of discussions. This conviction was echoed in the dialogues of the participants throughout the weekend. Many felt it important to assuage the problems of misunderstanding that exist between us. Humanists and religionists use different languages to talk about the same things. We all have some universal concerns for the quality of life of humanity and the planet we all inhabit together but we are still convincing ourselves that we are all allies in these concerns. This dialogue should allow us to learn how to speak a new language together about the deep human solidarity that all of our convictions are propelling us toward.

Humanists at our conference were concerned about the overall religious influence in public policy that affects the lives of non-religious people. Catholics and humanists agree that there needs to be a separation of religious beliefs from politics, but this does not mean that religious faith has no place in the public sphere. Catholics, for example, find it important that the values of our faith are reflected in some way in public policy. Many humanists do not agree with this. At the same time, Catholics may feel contemporary politics interferes with the religious convictions of its citizens on occasion, raising the importance of religious freedom. The opposite is also true.

We Catholics and religious believers in general, must come to terms with the positive values of secularity that we all esteem and where we can find that delicate balance of honoring our pluralistic society and the freedom that both religious and humanists enjoy in a free democratic society. Secularism is the principle for the organization of a diverse, open society where people follow different religious and non-religious ways of life. It requires that the institutions we share (and jointly pay for in our taxes) should provide a neutral public square where we can all
meet on equal terms. Both religious and non-religious voices need to be heard and heeded.

The purpose of this dialogue is not persuasion or conversion. Rather, it is an exercise in love and respect in order to create mutual understanding as a means toward collaborative service to our local communities and the world at large. Quoting the Interfaith Youth Corp in Chicago, “It is always better together.” Dialogue here is not merely a conversation about what we believe and do not believe, it is concerned first and foremost for the search of common ground by which humanists and religious believers can act with justice and compassion in a world often torn by indifference, xenophobia and intolerance. In this instance, respect is not ordered to the beliefs each one of us has, but to the persons themselves, no matter what they believe. So dialogue between religious and non-religious people is all about behavior, not about our feelings about what we believe. It leads us to understand that amidst all of our differences we have important common convictions. This common ground is the basis by which we renew and strengthen the solidarity of humanity.

Finally I close with a thought from Pope Francis. In his recently published Apostolic Exhortation, The Joy of the Gospel, he speaks of evangelization in a world that is pluralistic and diverse. In fact, today, thanks to the internet and the dynamics of globalization, we are actually hypersensitive to this diversity, if not somewhat dumbfounded by it. How do we face this diversity as people of faith? Francis speaks of a three way dialogue that the church must be engaged with. This dialogue includes our relationship with states and societies, culture and the sciences, and with those of other religious beliefs. Our dialogue with secularists and humanists is underlined by the Pope in this way: “As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation.”

To achieve this we cannot be naïve about how this dialogue must occur if we are to take the words of the Holy Father seriously. It implies that in dialogue we find that all beliefs may not be acceptable, even if understood. Similarly, respect for other convictions and beliefs do not mean refraining from criticism. Rather, it means taking them seriously — and if I take something seriously, I engage it critically. The work of this dialogue and its promised fruits implies some type of critical engagement. It is an important sign of how much we esteem each other and to what lengths we are willing to go to unearth solidarity, despite our differences. ▶

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23 Pope Francis, The Joy of the Gospel, 250
Reflecting on Our Common Ground

Participant Reflection: Sister Isabel Smyth, SND

Sister Isabel Smyth is the founding CEO of the Scottish Interfaith Council, the Scottish Catholic Bishops Associate Secretary for Interfaith Relations and an honorary lecturer in the Centre for Interfaith Studies, Glasgow University. She is a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Britain.

While we have much to be proud of in the area of inter-religious dialogue in Scotland we have not had too much success with dialogue between religious and non-religious groups. When I was involved in drawing up a document for the Scottish Government on Guidelines for Dialogue between religious and non-religious groups we tried to find examples of dialogues which included humanists. In spite of the fact that the humanist member of the working group spoke of his commitment to dialogue we could only come up with an example which had taken place in London in the aftermath of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Britain. At this meeting Catholics and Humanists had discussed a number of difficult issues and at the end a humanist summed up the catholic position and a catholic summed up the humanist perspective. I am not sure if this dialogue continued or if it was a one off event but the process of articulating the other’s point of view is a good and healthy one.

The dialogue held at the Conforti Institute in Coatbridge in early November was, therefore, a very welcome contribution to a dialogue that is becoming increasingly important and an initiative which will spawn other such dialogues in Scotland. The weekend was refreshing, informative, challenging and encouraging and I offer the following reflection on what spoke to me over the weekend.

The keynote address at the beginning of
the conference was given by Chris Stedman, the humanist chaplain at Harvard University. Chris describes himself as an atheist, a humanist and a secularist but one who is totally committed to interfaith dialogue. Chris has two degrees in religion, done a course in spiritual direction at the Jesuit Centre of Pastoral Studies, Loyola University and worked with the U.S. Interfaith Youth Core. Here was someone quite different from well-known atheists such as Richard Dawkins who was not out to get rid of religion but respected it, wanted to dialogue with it and was even interested in it. I suggested to Chris that he might even have a religious personality and he agreed with this though his religious stance is to reject any belief in a transcendent supreme being.

Another presentation was a bit more sobering. This was by Professor Callum Brown of Glasgow University who shared his research on ‘leavers’ of religion. His oral history stories suggested that many of the subjects of his research had given up religion because of a bad experience they had had when they were quite young (between 7 years and 9) or because they had not felt that their homosexuality had been accepted. Leaving religion for them had been liberating and honest. It reminded me of Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan theologian, who said that all religions had liberating and oppressive aspects to them. It was obvious that the ‘leavers’ had experienced only the oppressive aspects and had no insight into the liberating aspects that I presume those who remain in religion have experienced. This is shameful for those of us who are religious. Much of the tensions between religious and non-religious people is caused by religions being dogmatic and rejecting of people who felt they couldn’t fit in and some of this feeling had begun at an early age which also shows the importance of good religious education at the primary stage. An interesting statistic in Prof. Brown’s research showed a significant decline in religious affiliation in the 1960s. And this was universal in the western world. The reason was attributed to the self-realisation of women at the time — another lesson for religion.

There was a lot said about identity over the weekend with just the suggestion that religious identity was rather monolithic while people who were non-religious could be described as humanist, atheist, and secular depending on the context. But of course religious identity is also complex. Before the unfathomable Mystery of God I certainly could describe myself as agnostic, when it comes to desiring human flourishing I could describe myself as humanist and when it comes to living in a secular world which gives freedom to all religious and philosophical beliefs I could call myself secular. We all need to know who we are and a strong identity is necessary for dialogue but it is important to have an open identity which recognises the wisdom and
insights of others. This I would think is essential to any serious dialogue as the opposite, a closed identity does just what it says closes people off from dialogue and sets up barriers. To understand one another means to learn the other’s language. It is so easy for religious language to be rejected as meaningless whereas sometimes if we just scratched beneath the surface the language would reveal a human reality which all might agree on. An example of this was a participant suggesting that the language of call, used by another participant, meant nothing to her and yet as a psychiatrist she must have felt some attraction to leaving one profession to follow another — perhaps not such a different reality.

These thought are just one window into the discussions and dialogue of the weekend. These moved the dialogue on. Just as 9/11 moved inter-religious dialogue on from asking why to how so this initiative has set the scene for a conversation which will take for granted that our common humanity and common citizenship, our common concern for the future of our world, our nation and our society require a dialogue between religious and non-religious people. Now we can ask how we are going to further and develop this.
Common Ground: A Humanist Perspective

Participant Reflection: Jeremy Rodell

Jeremy Rodell is Chair of South West London Humanists and sits on two local interfaith forums as well as being a speaker for 3FF, an interfaith charity which, among other things, provide panels of speakers from different religion and belief backgrounds to schools in London and elsewhere. He is writing here in a personal capacity.

As a humanist living in London, it was a bit of a surprise to get an email from the British Humanist Association asking if I would like to attend a conference in Scotland organised by Catholic missionaries. I’m glad I said “yes.”

This was a bold initiative by the Xaverian Missionaries to find “Common Ground” across one of the most important fault-lines of western society, especially here in the UK. I did not need convincing of the value interfaith dialogue involving humanists — I was already involved in it. But I left the conference convinced both that more could be done and that what we’re doing today could be done better.

The conference itself was, of course, an example of dialogue in action. I had never met a missionary before and, if I’d thought about it at all, would probably have come up with the caricature of a Bible-bashing neo-colonialist. What I found were thoughtful people who had made major practical contributions to the lives of people in the countries where they’d lived — in one case helping to end a devastating civil war. That doesn’t make me more comfortable about Christian proselytization, but it certainly provides a more nuanced perspective. Equally, I don’t think many of the religious people present had met a humanist before. There were a lot of fascinating and enlightening conversations.

My main “takeaway” was that, at its core, this is all about human relationships. If people from different backgrounds know each other and have listened carefully enough to understand...
where the other person is coming from - and perhaps have worked together for a common cause - then it becomes almost impossible to demonise “The Other”. That doesn’t mean they will agree on everything. What Chris Stedman referred to as “Kumbaya” interfaith, where everyone loves one another and genuine differences are suppressed, has limited potential. But we were able to demonstrate at the end of the conference that, once trust has been established, it is possible to articulate conflicting views on controversial issues while maintaining mutual respect.

However, we shouldn’t be naïve. There are people within almost all religion and belief communities who have no interest in dialogue — they know they’re right and at best want either to isolate themselves, or to argue, and at worst to impose their views by force. They’re just not interested in listening and understanding people they consider to be “the enemy”. On the other hand, there are people in these same communities who understand that we live in a plural world in which mutual understanding is essential for peace, and where it is often possible to find common ground with those with whom we disagree. We learned from Chris Stedman that Eboo Patel, the US-based founder of the Inter Faith Youth Corps, refers to the divide between these two types of people as the “Faith Line”.

Those who organise and turn up to a conference on dialogue between believers and the non-religious are, by definition, on the liberal side of the Faith Line. But the fact that we don’t directly reach the hard liners doesn’t invalidate the exercise. They can only be reached, or perhaps faced down, by more open-minded people from their own belief backgrounds — people on “our side” of the line. It is by dialogue that we can all become better informed and feel better supported in advocating the interfaith approach within our own communities.

**So what does that mean in practice?**

Firstly, we need to get past some of the issues of language. Humanists don’t really like the term “interfaith”, or “interfaith dialogue”, which sound excluding, as Humanism isn’t a faith. But we need a term for dialogue between people with differing religious and non-religious beliefs, and “interfaith” is very widely used. Humanists should not be afraid to use it too. But we need the help of religious people to ensure that it’s understood to cover “faith and belief” not just religion.

More significantly, the conference demonstrated a misunderstanding over the meaning of “secularism”. I understand it to mean a level playing field, in which people are free to follow their religious and non-religious beliefs and practices — provided they do not erode the freedom and rights of others — with no particular group or organisation having privileges over others. In a secular society, freedom of religion and belief is protected. Like most humanists, I think that’s a good idea. Unfortunately, too often the term
has been used to mean “anti-religious”, not helped by the fact that there are some atheists who, as well as advocating secularism, would also like to see the end of religion. The result was that many of our religious colleagues at the conference thought that, when humanists say we want a secular society, we mean one in which there is no religion. It was something of an “ah-ha” moment when everyone realised that was not the case.

Secondly, “doing interfaith” needs to be more than sitting on a committee, useful though that may be. It needs to involve more people from different backgrounds getting to know each other, maybe in informal settings, through social media or — ideally — through shared community activity. That doesn’t necessarily mean creating a new organisation or activity, but rather finding something that is fun, stimulating and has a doable objective.

At the risk of gender stereotyping, it’s useful to be aware that men and women may come at interfaith, and especially the involvement of the non-religious, from different angles. Callum Brown’s academic analysis suggests that changes in women’s lives have been the main driver of the significant move away from religion in the UK since the 1960s. But he says that arguments about science and rationality have not played the key role here — “community” factors have been much more important. The implication for interfaith work is that the more cerebral type of interfaith dialogue about ideas may, on average, be more appealing to men than women, who may be more attracted by practical community activity. Both have a role to play.

Coming from the south of England, it was interesting to find that Scotland — which is probably less religiously diverse than London — seems to be way ahead in terms of official recognition of the importance of interfaith dialogue and inclusion of the non-religious, as well as providing practical help on how to make it work. “Belief in Dialogue” is an official publication by The Scottish Government providing a “good practice guide to religion and belief relations in Scotland”. Its introduction is written by Sister Isabel Smyth, Chair of the Scottish Working Group on Religion and Belief Relations, who was among the conference attendees. In it she links the need for dialogue back to the values of wisdom, justice, integrity and compassion which we saw inscribed on the Scottish Mace when the conference visited the Parliament in Edinburgh. These are shared human values — no humanist would disagree with them. “Belief in Dialogue” is clear about the involvement of the non-religious: “The need to recognise the equal legitimacy of every community to exist in Scotland is enshrined as a human right, and by this we need to think about community in the broadest sense of the word. While most religious communities have established formal structures, non-religious communities and groups have considerably fewer formal structures but still need to be seen as communities in the sense that those who advocate such beliefs are bound by
the beliefs they share.” It goes on to provide practical ways of building interfaith relationships which anyone can use. You can download it free from The Scottish Government website. The rest of us would do well to steal its thinking.
Time for atheists, secularists and humanists to engage in interfaith dialogue?

Participant Reflection: Gary McLelland,

Gary McLelland is a secular campaigner, Chair of Edinburgh Secular Society, organizer of Sunday Assembly Glasgow and supporter of Scottish Independence. He is a member of Humanist Society Scotland, National Secular Society, Royal Glasgow Philosophical Society, Republic and a student member of British Psychological Society. He is also a keen supporter of Glasgow Skeptics, Edinburgh Skeptics & University of Edinburgh Humanist Society.

Last month, I attended an event organised by the Xaverian Missionaries in the US and UK. The event was titled “A Conversation among Religious Believers and Humanists on Values and Ethics.”

I must admit to being very skeptical about the idea of being involved in ‘interfaith’ dialogue. As an atheist I do not identify myself as holding a ‘faith’ position. I was therefore very wary about the whole idea.

I sensed some slight trepidation on the part of the hosts, there were a few emails exchanged, and a phone call, during which it was made clear the event was not going to be a confrontational debate, but looking at notes of agreement between theists and atheists. I assured the organisers that I was capable of, if not agreement, then civility perhaps.

The event was held in the Conforti Institute in Coatbridge. Upon arrival I was greeted by a man called Hugh, a very pleasant and helpful guy, who seemed genuinely glad to see me. I was, after a quick registration, ushered into a large lounge where I met Rory Fenton of the British Humanist Association.
Shortly after we were shown into a large dining room for dinner. There were no placements, and no attempt by our hosts to engineer the seating arrangement so as to ensure a balance. This struck me as odd, and slightly off-putting. However, after a few minutes of introductions at the table, I felt very at ease. At my table were Rory Fenton (Vice-president of British Humanist Association & President of the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist & Secular Student societies in the UK), Prerna Abbi (Interfaith Youth Corps), Chris Stedman (Assistant Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University), John Catt (Treasurer of Leicester Secular Society & member of BHA) & Mary Aktay (St. Francis Xavier Mission Society). We had a lovely dinner, and despite our table being heavily weighted to the non-religious, Mary was charming and seemed genuinely interested to hear about all of our opinions.

I also noticed many people whom I recognised, in particular Rev Sally Fulton-Foster (Convener of the Church of Scotland’s Church and Society Council), Prof. Callum Brown (Glasgow University) and a few others.

The residential nature of the conference fostered a very informal and friendly environment, with individuals from various religious institutions, academics, secularists and humanists mixing freely.

I struggled at first to find the point of the conference, sure it was nice to chat with people of different groups and different opinions, but I tend to do that anyway — despite what people think. I was not really sure why I was there.

It was during a conversation with Fr. John Silavon that I realised how much we had in common (hence the title of the conference). I was able to laugh and joke with John, and share my thoughts quite openly. I could see that John was certainly not motivated by anything other than care and compassion, something which he gets from his faith. Whilst I'll always struggle to understand why this care and compassion needs a metaphysical connotation, I realised that it would simply not be a good use of time and resources to argue about it.

During some discussions, I was keen to point out that whilst religious people and non-religious people share many common values, justice, compassion and love — we may differ on how best to enact these values.

Many of the religious people at the conference seemed to have a genuine belief that the term ‘religious privilege’ is simply another way of atheists asserting their disgust at religion. I saw it as a good opportunity to explain that when atheists talk of ‘religious privilege’, they are actually talking about things like anti-atheist employment discrimination in denominational schools, unelected religious education representatives and lack of sex education in Catholic schools — not trying in any way to undermine any person’s own faith.
I was very keen to hear the other side of course, I find it strange to understand how anyone (religious or not) could not agree with the secular agenda. What I heard was a lot of fear and worry. The religious people that I spoke to all said that they felt persecuted and as though their most important belief was being attacked. Whilst I still don’t agree, I could see that these people were genuine. I still think about that a lot, and I think it will help to guide my campaigning in the future — I don’t want to scare people, nor make them feel scared to be religious.

This is the difficult dichotomy of interfaith dialogue. As secular humanists, we must not waiver from our responsibility to expose injustice and collusion, yet at the same time, seek to promote a positive and friendly dialogue of compassion and understanding. This is possible, in my opinion, however it takes a great deal of work and commitment to continue the dialogue, even if we hear things that makes us uncomfortable, in fact — especially if we hear those things!

There were many issues on which all of the delegates agreed, was the need to promote and engage more people in politics and public discourse.

So, all-in-all I must admit that I was convinced by my experiences at that conference, that atheists, humanists & secularists do have a place in this interfaith dialogue. Chris Stedman, an openly gay atheist humanist chaplain at Harvard was selected as the ambassador for the conference (an achievement in itself).

He argues 5 reasons why humanists should engage in interfaith work:

1) humanists are outnumbered, 2) they want to end extremism and oppression, 3) they want to overcome negative stereotypes and discrimination against non-believers, 4) they can learn from interfaith groups, and 5) such dialogue is consistent with their humanist values (from article by Brian Pellot).

So, I am delighted that in my role as Education Officer with the Humanist Society Scotland, I will be working to organise an interfaith conference in the New Year, on the theme of education. This event will seek to bring together partners from government, statutory and voluntary sectors, a range of skeptics, atheists, humanists and secularists from across Scotland, as well as a range of religious people.

Also, as a result of the conference, I have been asked by The Scottish Parliament to contribute to the ‘Time for Reflection’ slot at the opening of Parliament (a welcome alternative to the UK Parliament’s practise of Christian only prayers).

I’d like to take this opportunity again to thank the organisers. Attending the conference did not change any of my fundamental beliefs; it did make me consider how best I strive to meet them.