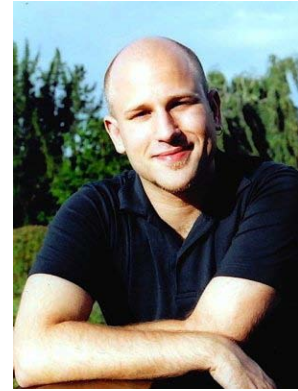


Interfaith Cooperation on the Big Issues

The major political and social challenges of the twenty-first century cannot be addressed by any one group alone. Dream if you wish about a time when religion will be no more. No one can stop you. But in the meantime, reason requires us to acknowledge that religion is here to stay, and we human beings may not be if we do not find the collective moral motivation to beat back climate change, rein in terrorism before it realizes its most destructive hopes, and prevent the erosion of our democracies as economies shift and hopes are dashed. My hope is that, on some of the issues listed below, Humanists can play a mediating role in the decades to come. We may not be the biggest or certainly the richest group, but if we keep in mind Margaret Mead's insight that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens is the only thing that has ever changed the world, we may just become the most influential group in getting the world's religious communities to sit down together and work out successful plans and policies where they are most desperately needed.



Full Inclusion in Interfaith

Before we can understand why Humanists and atheists must be invited, and must choose to participate, in interfaith activities around the world, we need to ask what *interfaith* means. Gustav Niebuhr, in his book *Beyond Tolerance*, writes, "At its heart, it's a grassroots educational process in which the goal is to gain knowledge about individuals and their beliefs in a way that lessens fear. It is a new activity in the world, an entirely new phenomenon in our history. It is a social good, a basis for hope, and a tendency that ought to be nurtured and cultivated."¹

We know that interfaith is the model, if for no other reason than that one side destroying the other is not. And fortunately, the way to promote interfaith work is not by promoting belief in what Alan Ginsberg called "Allee Samee," the lowest common denominator bringing people together to spout platitudes back and forth. "Humanists and Muslims are really the same because..." is never a good sentence, no matter how you choose to end it, no matter how decent and noble your intentions. Let's allow people, as Jonathan Sacks titles his book, the *Dignity of Difference*.

Eboo Patel and his very talented staff at the Interfaith Youth Core are living out their belief in pluralism in an impressive way. The IFYC has gone out of its way to include Humanists and atheists in recent years, though he admits he did not start the organization with that intention. Mainly, Patel—a progressive, religious Muslim—wanted to bring together young leaders from many backgrounds, to be an alternative to the corps of leaders being trained by Al Qaeda and other extremist religious organizations. These young people, now by the tens of thousands each

¹ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tolerance*, xix.

year, do community service and educational projects together, and if you just watch some of IFYC's videos or get involved with them locally, you may agree it's remarkable work. But Eboo originally assumed it would be just for religious people, and to his credit, he's been willing to learn: "In the great American pragmatist tradition, it just happened," he told me, that atheists and Humanists became one of his core constituencies. But as my mom used to say, "Nothing *just happens*." The IFYC became truly pluralistic because consistently, over the course of several years, one in five young people attending their events was nonreligious, and they were open enough to recognize this and honor it.

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Good With and Without God: Humanists in an Interfaith Nation

As with other civil rights struggles, sometimes we can make progress toward our ultimate goals in unexpected ways. This was certainly the case in Philadelphia in the summer of 2008, when a clash of roadside billboards gave way to a moment of interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Earlier that year, a group called the Philadelphia Coalition of Reason (PhillyCoR) had come together for the purpose of uniting the city's numerous Humanist, secular, and atheist groups toward the common goals of raising the profile of the nonreligious in the area. To that end, the group rented a billboard along a busy section of I-95 to display the message "Don't believe in God? You are not alone." But it happened that just up the Interstate, a large local church, the Light Houses of Oxford Valley, had taken out a billboard to display a similar sign—both had a bright blue sky with floating clouds in the background—to encourage drivers to "Experience God." When members of the ostensibly rival groups became aware of each other's efforts, they braced for a long (and potentially very expensive, if not bloody) advertising war. But then they came up with a better idea.

In a story for the *Philadelphia City Paper* entitled "Religious Smackdown!! (Not Really)," local reporter Boyce Upholt playfully described how the church members discovered their competition and realized that their God might need to "up his game."² On the church's website, Pastor Bob Jones offered this challenge: "I am not asking you to believe, but simply open your eyes and minds and see if there is something more." Reading the blog was my friend and fellow Humanist activist Martha Knox, coordinator of the PhillyCoR group. Martha reached out to Light Houses and offered, instead of more slogans, for PhillyCoR to join them in a day of joint community service. "We want those who disagree with us to understand that we share the same secular values," Martha said. "Charity is a secular, human value, not [only] a religious one."

² Boyce Upholt, *Philadelphia City Paper*, August 6, 2008.

As Upholt described it,

And so, on Saturday I joined a crowd of Christians and atheists, 20-odd of each and all wearing T-shirts to mark their allegiance, at the Philabundance warehouse in North Philadelphia.

Things began quietly. The groups mingled in the parking lot, waiting for someone to take charge. When I was discovered as a neutral party, I was assigned to take a group photo. Atheists and Christians clustered around a picnic table, patterned together awkwardly like boys and girls in an elementary class picture. It was hard to tell them apart: Both sides consisted of nice families with children and polite young adults. Even their T-shirts looked the same, with subtle blue logos across the chest. Only the details gave a few away: a "Spirit in the Sky" ringtone on one side; Knox's edgily short hair on the other.

In the end the groups got along very well as they worked together to pack personal and medical supplies for homeless shelters. No one was rude, and in particular the teens on both sides found they had a lot in common. The reporter, clearly sensing he had a great story on his hands, seemed to Knox to be waiting for someone to break into a debate about theology, but it was not to be. "What's right in your heart is right in your heart," said one atheist mother. And "People are in different places in life," said Pastor Heidi Butterworth. "Hey, you guys are other people in the community. We love you and God loves you. It's simple."

Humanists and atheists have learned from the experience to focus on deeds, and PhillyCoR has continued to get together for a community service outing every month since. Occasionally we all need to remember that we can get beyond arguing over whether we can be good with or without a God, and simply be good, together.