

Atheists in Interfaith: Our Place at the Table

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"Interfaith" has become something of a buzzword in the last year or so. Organizations are springing up to promote it, colleges and universities are embracing it, even the White House is reaching out to get involved. But there's still plenty of confusion out there as to what exactly interfaith is, and even more confusion from the nontheistic perspective.

In October 2010, I attended an Interfaith Leadership Institute hosted by the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) as a "campus ally." This opportunity to participate in a two-day interfaith program helped me to understand exactly what this hot new movement is and how we, as people of no faith, fit into it.

Interfaith is a rising trend, particularly on college campuses. It brings together individuals of differing worldviews (not just religious or theistic) to set aside their differences in order to accomplish shared goals. In many ways, the interfaith movement is tapping into people's religious traditions to get them involved in activities that look a whole lot like real, secular pluralism.

Tackling the obstacles

When I bring up the idea of interfaith with my secular student groups, I often get some pushback. With a name like "interfaith," can nontheists really be welcome? Should we be getting involved? We aren't really religious, after all—so do we have a place in interfaith?

The answer is pretty simple. **Yes.** Throughout the IFYC workshop I attended, the presenters not only avoided the trite "we all believe in some kind of god" lines, but made it very clear that nonreligious individuals were every bit as welcome as the religious. Sure, the language gets a little clunky—you get phrases like "religious and nonreligious people" or "people of all faiths and no faith." But it shows that they're going out of their way to make sure we're included.

So why the name "interfaith?" I'll agree, it's not perfect—and many leaders even in the interfaith movement agree with that. But first of all, the "interfaith" movement has quite a bit of cultural attention right now, and there's something to be said for running with the momentum one has. Besides, I think it's an imperfection we can relate to. How many labels do we have to describe our own movement? Atheists, agnostics, humanists, skeptics, freethinkers, naturalists, nontheists, nonbelievers, brights, so on and so forth. We're not exactly in a position to point fingers here.

There are a lot of misconceptions about what interfaith programs are and are not. In the experiences I've had with it, interfaith is very often an effort toward pluralism, at setting aside our differences and trying to understand one another. It's an effort to bring people together for social action or service projects.

We can see a similar list of what interfaith is not. Interfaith is absolutely not an opportunity for anyone to proselytize one another—from one religion to another, religious to nonreligious, or

nonreligious to religious. And while we may set aside our differences, interfaith doesn't try to pretend that we don't have differences. It is not an effort to give religion a special place in society or on campus, nor is it an effort to make everyone the same.

As nonbelievers, getting involved in interfaith has some awesome features. It's a great opportunity for large-scale service projects, and it can help make nontheists more visible. It's a chance to demonstrate that we can, in fact, be "good without God." On campus, interfaith programs can mean opportunities for representation or access to special funding or facilities. Last but not least, participation in interfaith programs can build a relationship that can help facilitate the times when conflict does arise. (Anyone remember "Everybody Draw Mohammad Day?")

But as with anything, there are some downsides. It can be hard for a brazen nontheist to set aside the need to question and challenge religion. Because of the name "interfaith," outsiders might think that atheism is just another religion. Some interfaith programs aren't as welcoming to nontheists as others, and sometimes it might require limiting or uncomfortable "mutual respect" agreements. Sometimes these are challenges to overcome and opportunities to educate our communities about nontheism; other times, they may be reasons to decline participation in an interfaith program. Every nontheist and every group is different and will have to decide based on their own circumstances whether interfaith participation is right for them.

Despite these drawbacks, I still encourage nontheists to participate in interfaith programs. I send our students out with some preparation, though, because certain situations are very likely to come up. Language is the biggest area to be prepared for. Interfaith programs are still figuring out that "people of all religions" doesn't cover everyone, and sometimes you'll still hear people using words like "spirituality." Generally speaking, take it in the spirit it was meant: most of the time, language like this is a result of people and programs working to establish new ways of discussing a variety of worldviews and identities, and is not meant to exclude or insult anyone.

Likewise, it's very common to encounter misconceptions and stereotypes about nonbelievers. Sometimes a group may face outright discrimination from an interfaith program. But these situations can all be handled through preparation and patience - and we have to admit that these problems aren't limited to the realm of interfaith.

The pluralistic future

So where is interfaith headed? At the leadership institute I attended, IFYC launched their "Better Together" and "What IF..." campaigns. Scheduled for a launch in January of 2011, the "What IF..." campaign plans to bring students together for large-scale service projects taking place around April of this year. Over 130 campuses are participating so far, and IFYC has made it clear that nontheistic students are very welcome in this project.

Foundation Beyond Belief is taking steps to participate in the growing realm of interfaith. The new "Challenge the Gap" program is a great counterpart to the work IFYC and other interfaith programs are doing: getting people to look beyond our differences and focus on the areas in which we have common values and goals.

With theists and nontheists both working to reach out to one another, we can't help but make a difference in this world. And that's something to get excited about!