



FROM STORY TO ACTION:
TIPS FOR BRIDGING THE RELIGIOUS - NONRELIGIOUS DIVIDE



A resource to accompany Chris Stedman's *Faithist*

In *Faithist*, Chris Stedman talks about what it meant for him to build interfaith cooperation with his religious friends. But how do we do that when so much of the narrative we hear is about a fundamental divide between religious and nonreligious people? Whether you're an atheist, an agnostic, a humanist, a deeply religious person, or somewhere in between, this resource can help you think about how to bridge the religious-nonreligious divide. You've read about Chris' experiences with Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) and how IFYC helped Chris realize that nonreligious people have an important place in interfaith work. This resource, authored by IFYC, will help you think about how you can be a part of building interfaith cooperation. It will address some frequently asked questions around interfaith work, give tips for religious and nonreligious people who want engage in interfaith work, and offer you ideas on how to get involved in the larger interfaith movement.

IFYC's mission is to make interfaith cooperation the norm, rather than the exception, for how people of different religious and nonreligious identities interact. If you want to learn more, visit ifyc.org.

What is interfaith cooperation?

In a world of interfaith cooperation, religious and nonreligious people can live together in equal dignity and mutual loyalty, inspired by their various traditions and convictions to work together for the common good. Drawing from Harvard scholar Diana Eck, IFYC articulates interfaith cooperation as the active engagement of religious diversity to a constructive end. Interfaith cooperation has three essential components:

Respect for individual religious or nonreligious identity. Respect for identity means that everyone can bring their full identities to this work. There's space for people to believe that they are right and others are wrong, and that their beliefs are true and others' are not. Interfaith cooperation is not syncretistic or relativistic; no one has to concede exclusive truth claims to be part of it – whether you are an Orthodox Jew, a conservative Christian, or an atheist, you are welcome to the table of interfaith cooperation.

Mutually inspiring relationships. Interfaith cooperation builds relationships across religious and nonreligious boundaries, while creating space for real conversations about disagreements and difference and a sense that each person gains from the relationship.

Common action for the common good. Interfaith cooperation is based on the conviction that people of different religious and nonreligious backgrounds have shared values that call them to make the world a better place. By working together

on local and global projects based on these shared values, individuals learn to connect to those who are different from them while strengthening their communities.

Do the nonreligious have a place in interfaith work?

Absolutely! We don't think it's possible to make interfaith cooperation a social norm without the inclusion of those who identify as nonreligious. In *Faithiest*, you read about Chris' doubts about whether interfaith work could include him as a nonreligious person, and about how he found a place in the broader movement. Like Chris, we believe that nonreligious communities have a stake in building a society that is characterized by interfaith cooperation.

I'm nonreligious and I want to engage in interfaith work, but where do I start?

Here are some basic recommendations for nonreligious people who want to get involved in interfaith work:

Explore your tradition and values. In *Faithiest*, Chris writes about how finding a community of other nonreligious people and reading the works of other atheist thinkers helped inform his work as an interfaith activist. Seek out the history of your philosophical worldview. Atheists, agnostics, humanists, and those who identify as nonreligious have a wide diversity of contemporary opinion, and as varied and rich a history as those who identify with religious traditions. These can inform your perspective on doing interfaith work.

Define interfaith cooperation for you. What does interfaith cooperation mean for your worldview as a humanist, atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious person? As an individual who is agnostic, atheist, humanist, or nonreligious, what does it mean for you to be an advocate for interfaith cooperation? Think about what it means to say: "I am not religious, but respecting the identities of others matters to me."

Tell positive stories. Tell the story of someone you love or respect that is religious. Think about the religious convictions and the motivations of interfaith leaders like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, or your family and friends. How are you, as a nonreligious person, inspired by the examples of religious people in your life? How are you equally inspired by those who are nonreligious?

Seek basic religious literacy and interfaith literacy. Religious literacy is the knowledge of the basic tenants, observances, practices and terms of different religious and

philosophical perspectives. For example, you wouldn't want to serve pepperoni pizza at an interfaith event since many Muslims and Jews do not eat pork because of their religious beliefs. Don't be afraid of what you don't know. Ask questions! It's impossible to know everything, but it's important to keep learning. Interfaith literacy is a step beyond religious literacy – it's knowing more than just facts about diverse religious and nonreligious communities, but also knowledge of how those traditions speak directly to the importance of interfaith cooperation. Just as Chris learned more about how the religious beliefs of his friends motivated their volunteer work together in a Chicago soup kitchen, you too can ask questions about what motivates people from other communities to work for the greater good.

Take action. Establish dialogue with religious people and groups in a way that is open, honest, and respectful. Consider what you have in common with people who are religious, even while acknowledging differences. Join an interfaith group or if you are a college or university student, get involved with the Better Together campaign on your campus (more on that later), and share your nonreligious story with them.

I'm religious and I want to engage nonreligious communities in interfaith work, but I'm not sure how.

The nonreligious community can be a huge value added to your interfaith work. Here are some basic recommendations for religious people who want to engage the nonreligious community in interfaith work:

Speak the language. Use language that is inclusive and welcoming to people of all faiths and perspectives, including those who do not ascribe to a particular faith or spiritual tradition. For example, at IFYC, we use the phrases “religious and nonreligious traditions” or “religious and nonreligious people” in our work.

Recognize the diversity in the nonreligious community. Just as not all Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all exactly alike in their beliefs and identities, the same applies for nonreligious people. In the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey 15 percent of Americans report having no religion, which included individuals that identified as Humanistic, agnostics, atheists, secular, “no religion,” or “none.”¹ Many nonreligious individuals may still believe in a supernatural force or deity, and some nontheists may still identify as religious. A lot of this may be new to you, and that's okay. Don't be afraid to ask questions!

Tell positive stories. You may know the powerful stories of how Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi brought people of different backgrounds together bring about change. Do you know an inspirational story of a nonreligious person?

Ever heard of A. Philip Randolph? We hadn't either, until the Secular Student Alliance (secularstudents.org) told us he was one of their secular heroes.

A. Philip Randolph lived in 1889-1979, and was tremendously active as a union organizer and labor rights activist, and later became a highly-visible spokesperson for African-American civil rights. In WWII he organized a march to protest racial discrimination in war industries and segregation in the armed forces -- and he was successful on both issues. He continued working for civil rights and was one of the primary organizers of the famous March on Washington where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 for his work. He often identified as an atheist, was named Humanist of the Year in 1970 by the American Humanist Association, and signed the Humanist Manifesto II in 1973.

Whether it's A. Philip Randolph or someone in your family or circle of friends, tell the story of someone you love or respect that is nonreligious.

Include nonreligious leadership. Interfaith events are more successful when the diverse constituents of a community are bought in from the beginning and given a stake in the vision. Many college and university campuses have leadership teams that are committed to advancing interfaith cooperation – and having a diverse leadership team includes representation from the nonreligious community.

If you are a college student, get involved in Better Together

In an effort to help students build awareness for interfaith cooperation on their campus, IFYC has developed a national interfaith action campaign called Better Together (ifyc.org/bettertogether). Serving as a unifying call-to-action, the Better Together campaign inspires students from all over the country and different religious and nonreligious traditions to come together to address today's most important issues.

One great example of a Better Together event occurred on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 at the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard. Organized in partnership with the Tufts Freethought Society and representatives of religious and nonreligious communities in the greater Boston community, Be Better Together for 9/11 had over two hundred volunteers package 10,000 meals for youth with low food security in Boston, surpassing their goal of 9,110. Volunteers also penned over two hundred letters to Massachusetts' representatives in Congress, requesting that funding for hunger relief programs not be cut in the next fiscal year. Chris Stedman helped organize the event and said: "We were over capacity for volunteer spaces the entire time, and people just kept coming! I'm speechless. This is what happens when people of diverse religious and secular identities come together for the greater good. Today, we were truly Better Together."

There are several ways you can get involved in Better Together and get the tools and skills to organize events like Harvard's Be Better Together for 9/11:

Attend an Interfaith Leadership Institute (ILI). Student organizers attending ILIs are trained in-depth in the key components of interfaith cooperation and how to run a successful Better Together campaign. We invite you to attend one of our ILIs for students, faculty, and staff. You'll return to campus with the core skills of interfaith leadership and be ready to organize Better Together. Secular Student Alliance, director of campus organizing, Lyz Liddell had this to say about nonreligious student participation at the Institutes:

The Interfaith Youth Core has done a great job of inviting nontheists into their programs. At the Leadership Institute I attended, it was clear that nontheists were a part of the program: not just gladhanding or lip service, but real inclusion. IFYC staff had programming specific to nontheists, and the other attendees were interested to know how they could reach out to nontheists on their own campuses. While not all interfaith programs are equally welcome to nontheistic students, I am always comfortable sending my student leaders to IFYC events. - Lyz Liddell

Find out more: ifyc.org/ili.

Get DIY resources online. Can't make it to the ILIs? We have all the toolkits and resources you can imagine on the Better Together website. Start out by downloading the Better Together Quickstart at ifyc.org/bettertogether. Connect with other organizers and Better Together Coaches – seasoned interfaith leaders who have run Better Together and are ready to answer your questions – on Facebook at [Facebook.com/WeAreBetterTogether](https://www.facebook.com/WeAreBetterTogether).

Other resources and ways to get involved

IFYC has a vibrant and active community online – connect with us to get news and updates from the interfaith movement: Follow us on Twitter @ifyc, visit us at ifyc.org or find us on Facebook.

NonProphet Status is a place where a multitude of voices help define a new narrative for the secular community, one that respects the religious identities of others while remaining authentic to our own identities: nonprophetstatus.com.

State of Formation features emerging voices in interreligious dialogue who draw upon their academic and community work and reflect on the pressing questions of a religiously pluralistic society: stateofformation.org.

Secular Student Alliance organizes and empowers nonreligious students around the country, and provides excellent resources for secular students interested in interfaith work: secularstudents.org/interfaith.

The Pluralism Project helps Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources: pluralism.org.

The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions cultivates harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities: parliamentofreligions.org.

Values in Action at the Humanist Community at Harvard is the first ever interfaith and community service civic engagement initiative based out of a Humanist or nontheistic organization, and serves as a resource for others who wish to learn more about atheist-led interfaith service work: harvardhumanist.org.

Still have questions? We have answers.

Contact us:



Interfaith Youth Core
Online: www.ifyc.org
Phone: (312) 573-8825
Toll Free: 1 (888) 573-8825
Fax: (312)573-1542
Email: info@ifyc.org
Twitter: @ifyc

1. Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture, "American Religious Identification Survey 2008" 17 Nov 2011 <<http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/>>