



Interfaith Cooperation 101 // Common Questions and Concerns



1. What is interfaith cooperation?

Interfaith cooperation: it may sound like a far-off pipe dream, but each day, students at U.S. colleges and universities are turning this vision into reality. Students of diverse religious and non-religious identities are working together to tutor immigrant and refugee youth in their communities, plant community gardens, combat domestic violence, end deaths due to malaria, and more. Brick by brick, these students are building a world where people can live in equal dignity and mutual loyalty. Drawing from Harvard scholar Diana Eck, IFYC articulates interfaith cooperation as the active engagement of religious diversity to a constructive end.¹ Interfaith cooperation, which is interchangeable with “religious pluralism,” has three essential components:



- ⊙ *Respect for individual religious or non-religious identity*
Respect for identity means that everyone can bring their full identity to the table. 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.
- ⊙ *Mutually inspiring relationships*
Interfaith cooperation builds relationships that move toward authentic friendships even as space emerges for real conversations about disagreements and difference. “Mutually inspiring” also means that each person gains and grows from the relationship.
- ⊙ *Common action for the common good*
Common action is integral to building stronger communities. Motivated by shared values across religious and non-religious traditions, interfaith cooperation can both foster community change and spur interfaith conversation and reflection (See Question 3). This is where interfaith cooperation has the potential both to

create broad-minded individuals and transform communal relations in a diverse society.

The long-term mission of IFYC is to make interfaith cooperation the norm, rather than the exception, for how people of different faiths interact.



2. What are shared values?

Shared values are deeply held, widely embraced principles - such as compassion, hospitality, and justice - that exist both within and across numerous religious and non-religious perspectives. These values and beliefs can motivate communities to engage in service or social action work together. Interfaith cooperation often provides students with their first opportunity to articulate the personal values that motivate their social action and to connect these ideals to those of other religious and non-religious identities. These values are at the center of interfaith

conversation and reflection: recognizing them can help break down prejudices, foster mutually inspiring relationships, and create appreciative knowledge of diverse religious and non-religious traditions (See Question 3).²

3. *What role does interfaith dialogue play in IFYC's model?*

Whereas many models of interfaith programming are dialogue-focused, IFYC's model is action-focused, seeking to create opportunities for people of different religious and non-religious identities to work together on issues of common concern. Working together creates a shared experience from which conversation can begin and which can create a foundation for tackling difficult dialogues. Talking about religion, for both religious and non-religious students, tends to be taboo, especially in mixed company, and the dominant frameworks for doing so are often focused on confrontation or condemnation. At the same time, opening the door to such conversation around common action projects is vital to fostering interfaith cooperation.

IFYC's conversation and reflection activities most often begin by allowing students to articulate shared values across religious and non-religious identities (See Question 2). Giving students the space to articulate and understand shared values enhances the potential for common action projects to create inspiring interfaith relationships and build respect across lines of difference. As sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell – and classic theories of intergroup relations – note, common action projects already provide a key opportunity to build such relationships and break down prejudices.³ Conversation and reflection around shared values strengthen the potential for social cohesion by allowing participants to explore: what are the values that connect us across lines of religious difference? How can we continue to build upon these ideals in order to better society? Students develop both appreciative knowledge of the religious “other” and understand first-hand the importance of continued interfaith engagement.⁴

For more on interfaith conversation and reflection, see IFYC's *Making It Interfaith: Incorporating Interfaith Cooperation into Existing Programming resource*, available at ifyc.org/resources.

4. *Doesn't interfaith cooperation exclude agnostic, atheist, or secular humanist (“non-religious”) students?*

No. The movement for interfaith cooperation is open to all those that believe in this vision, including those that identify as agnostic, atheist, or secular humanist (referred to here as “non-religious”). Breaking down the walls between religious and non-religious communities is vital to truly engaging religious diversity and building a world of equal dignity and mutual loyalty. These values can be drawn from a multiplicity of sources, not merely religious. Interfaith work is often one of the first opportunities non-religious students have to articulate how their values align with those of religious practitioners, which can create respect and build relationships across these lines of difference (See Question 2).



As Greg Epstein, Harvard Humanist Chaplain and author of *Good without God* notes, the non-religious have long played a key role in and benefited from the U.S. heritage of pluralism. Interfaith cooperation allows non-religious communities to further the ethos and tradition of pluralism while creating new understanding around the diversity and depth of their beliefs.⁵ In fact, the interfaith movement is filled with numerous leaders from the agnostic, atheist, and secular humanist communities.

In order to create a space for the non-religious, Epstein also highlights the importance of inclusive language and targeted outreach to welcome such participants.⁶ IFYC tries to 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.

5. *Is interfaith cooperation about syncretism or watering down distinctions between traditions?*

IFYC's definition of interfaith cooperation starts with respect for different religious and non-religious traditions, which includes those from across the theological and philosophical spectrum, from the most liberal to the most conservative. "Respect" here means that participants can bring their full identities to interfaith work, even those parts that might be in direct disagreement with other identities. While recognizing shared values, interfaith cooperation does not deny the differences between religious or non-religious perspectives, nor does it deny the nuanced ways such shared values are understood and articulated. Interfaith cooperation is founded on a sociological – not theological – notion of pluralism that recognizes the possibility for religious diversity to be mobilized to create social cohesion and positive social relations.⁷ This means that even when real disagreements arise, there is still a sense of common ground between participants who may disagree with one another.

6. *Can students with exclusive truth claims participate in interfaith cooperation programs?*

The purpose of interfaith cooperation is not to create a unified theological or philosophical belief system, but to mobilize people of different religious and non-religious perspectives to take social action on the basis of their values. As such, no one has to concede exclusive truth claims to participate in interfaith work. In order to ensure that students feel free to share their religious position – whether holding exclusive truth claims or believing in the universalism of all faiths – in interfaith conversation and reflection, it is critical for facilitators to set a safe space for participants through guidelines or agreements. For more on setting a safe space, see IFYC's *Making It Interfaith: Incorporating Interfaith Cooperation into Existing Programming* resource, available at ifyc.org/resources.

7. *What if students don't have a strong religious or non-religious identity – how can they engage in interfaith work?*

Many students come to interfaith action with no particular religious or non-religious affiliation, and their participation is equally vital for building interfaith cooperation. Because conversation and discussion in the context of interfaith cooperation centers on shared values, students have the opportunity to explore and share their own values, whether or not they derive directly from a religious tradition. IFYC

often uses storytelling as a tool to help participants act as "scholars of their own experience," speaking from their own experiences of their core values instead of as representatives of any given tradition. Like much multicultural and service-learning programming, interfaith action offers students a glimpse into the perspectives of other communities, often prompting questions for further inquiry within their own lives as they learn about others' beliefs and values.

8. *Why do you focus on college students and colleges and universities?*

College and university campuses have often been at the vanguard of social change movements in the United States. Whether it was civil rights, multiculturalism, or environmental sustainability, leaders from across the campus ecology – students, faculty, staff and administrators – have taken up the charge of bringing new, powerful ideas forward to the American public, shaping the national discourse and inspiring emerging generations to work for the common good.

9. *Interfaith cooperation sounds great, but has this ever really worked in the U.S.?*

The U.S. has seen tremendous historical impact from individuals drawing inspiration from their deeply held beliefs and working together for the improvement of society. The U.S. civil rights movement – with great leadership from young people on college and university campuses – provides a notable example of interfaith cooperation.

Not only was the movement composed of people with varying religious and non-religious affiliations but:

- ⊕ The movement's leadership explicitly drew from religious and non-religious texts, communication styles (e.g., preaching, music, etc.), and shared values to mobilize people towards change.
- ⊕ College and university groups connected with community-based organizations, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, churches, mosques, synagogues, and other places of worship.
- ⊕ Christian ministers such as Martin Luther King Jr. partnered with various religious and non-religious figures, such as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a conservative Jew, or secular activist Ella Baker. In their speeches and through their actions,

these leaders made clear to the public that they were working together on the basis of shared values.

Further, these critical actors worked in the context of global leaders from a variety religious and non-religious orientations. These included Mahatma Gandhi, whose satyagraha notion of nonviolent resistance became a key concept utilized by King Jr., Gandhi's ally in the Indian Independence Movement and nonviolent Muslim leader Badshah Kahn, and Buddhist antiwar leader Thich Naht Hahn in Vietnam.⁸

For more information on IFYC's methodology and approach to interfaith cooperation, please see our downloadable resources available at ifyc.org/resources.

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1. Eck, D., "What is pluralism?" (Cambridge, MA: Pluralism Project at Harvard University, n.d.) Retrieved from <http://pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/what-is-pluralism>
 2. Patel, Eboo and Meyer, Cassie. "The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities." *Journal of College & Character* 12, No. 1 (2011).
 3. Putnam, Robert and Campbell, David, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). See also: Sherif, Muzafer, O.J. Harvey, B. Jack White, William R. Hood and Carolyn W. Sherif, *The Robbers Cave Experiment: Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).
 4. Patel and Meyer, 2011.
 5. Epstein, Greg, *Good without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).
 6. Ibid., 164
 7. Patel and Meyer, "The Civic Relevance."
 8. For more on the role of religion in the civil rights movement, see: Morris, Aldon, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).