



# IDENTIFYING A THEOLOGY OR ETHIC OF INTERFAITH COOPERATION

This resource was created in conjunction with selected [IFYC alumni](#), who are part of a growing movement of young leaders building interfaith cooperation around the country. Alumni contributors are: Hannah Minks-Clark, Usra Ghazi, Chaplain Chris Stedman, Rabbi Josh Stanton, Anand Venkatkrishnan, and Rue Khalsa.

A theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation is a coherent articulation of stories, teachings, texts, scripture, history, heroes, and/or poetry from your religious or nonreligious tradition that highlight the importance of positive relationships between people who orient around religion differently. Such an articulation is a vital tool for interfaith leaders to cultivate. This resource is intended to help you begin to create and develop your own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation.

## Why “Ethic” of Interfaith Cooperation?

It is important to use language that is inclusive and welcoming to people of all faiths and perspectives, including those who are nonreligious. For example, we use the phrases “religious and nonreligious traditions” or “religious and nonreligious communities” in our work. We recognize that the term “theology” implies a belief in God, so using the term “ethic” in conjunction with theology makes space for those who identify as secular or nonreligious to also define an ethic from their tradition that supports interfaith cooperation.

## Why is it important for interfaith leaders to develop their own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation?

One of the most important skills of interfaith leadership is to be able to articulate your own religious or nonreligious identity in a way that both affirms your beliefs and builds pluralism. Essentially, people should be able to articulate their own faith or secular identity and still be in relationship with others. As interfaith leaders, sometimes people say something like “Even though I’m Christian, I’m friends with a Muslim.” In a world where interfaith cooperation is the norm, a person will say: “*Because* I am a Christian, I have formed a friendship with a Muslim.” To quote IFYC’s founder and president Eboo Patel, “In other words, ‘It is precisely the values that I derive from Christianity that attract me to a person as righteous as you.’ Here, faith and friendship are connected, mutually enriching instead of mutually exclusive.”

Other valuable reasons for interfaith leaders to develop a theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation:

- ▶ **Provides justification for interfaith work.** For many folks that are deeply committed to their traditions, they would not want to do something that is not explicitly called out in their tradition.
- ▶ **Strengthens your own identity.** One of the less talked about parts of interfaith work is how it strengthens your own identity. Many people find that when they engage in interfaith work they discover new aspects of their religious or secular tradition because they are asked to consider and discuss the questions of someone who was not raised in their tradition.
- ▶ **Sharpens your mobilizing skills.** Religious identity is important to many communities, so tapping into inspirational stories from different traditions that emphasize interfaith cooperation is a great tool for reaching out to different groups within your campus or community. In turn, the sharing of these stories creates a space for others to feel comfortable and welcome, thus attracting more people to a group.

## How do you develop your own theology of interfaith cooperation?

The first step to develop your own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation is to ask yourself this question: “What from my tradition or worldview inspires me to be involved in the interfaith movement?” Think about stories, texts, teachings or particular heroes from your tradition that emphasize the importance of relationship with people of different backgrounds.

*Ready to get started? Here are examples of IFYC’s alumni who have developed their own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation.*

### A core text from your background that supports interfaith cooperation:

#### A Christian Theology of Interfaith Cooperation - Hannah Minks-Clark

Many of the most significant elements of Catholic belief—the Trinity, communion, the Kingdom of God—all point to the notion of unity. Unity is not uniformity. For a theology of interfaith cooperation from a Catholic perspective, this is a key distinction to keep in mind. Saint Paul clearly calls for a unified church in his New Testament letters, and he is quick to articulate that this does not mean we are all destined to be the same. The call to value diversity is apparent in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians where he writes: “Now there are many varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” In my faith, this letter helps me to understand that difference is not analogous to division and thus to love and serve one another accordingly.

According to the book of Genesis, the method by which God chose to create was through making distinctions: darkness and light, earth and sky, land and water. Diversity gave birth to creation; diversity is life-giving. In both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the value of diversity sits as a cornerstone. As a Catholic, Scripture doesn’t simply acknowledge that the People of God manifests itself in a multitude of cultures and religions, but it teaches me that I need that varied manifestation to accomplish my mission on this earth. Diversity is the pulse of unity, not the flat line that divides.

#### An Islamic Theology of Interfaith Cooperation - Usra Ghazi

My Muslim identity is rooted in stories about the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. My personal faith is enriched by verses of the Holy Qur’an that teach me not only how to understand God and His creation but how to *be* in this world. When I think about what drew me to interfaith work, I’m reminded of an Islamic song I grew up singing which refers to verse 49:13: “O mankind! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another.” God also commands us to act with kindness and full equity toward nonbelievers in verse 60:8: “For indeed, God loves those who act justly.”

My theology of interfaith cooperation rests on these foundational texts, and it is shaped and weathered by encounters with others: my agnostic best friend from middle school, my Jewish “faith-sister” in college, and my Hindu co-worker are just a few of the people who have guided me in my faith formation, and served alongside me at community projects and advocacy campaigns. They caused me to look inward and better understand myself. *Why do I serve? What do I believe about the importance of justice?* And they showed me

#### Categories to organize your own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation:

- A core text or teaching from within your tradition or worldview that you believe supports/encourages interfaith cooperation.
- A current or historical example of interfaith cooperation in your tradition or worldview.
- The history of interfaith cooperation in your tradition or worldview, including a couple of vivid examples.
- A “hero” or important figure in your tradition or worldview who has inspired you to care about interfaith cooperation.
- A concept in your tradition or worldview that has inspired you to care about interfaith cooperation.
- A practice, ritual, or holiday in your tradition or worldview that has inspired you to care about interfaith cooperation.

the impact we can make on our world through mutual action. These exchanges have shed a different and brighter light on the stories and scriptures I read while growing up. My ethic of interfaith cooperation is my faith illuminated through action with others.

**A core teaching from your background that supports interfaith cooperation:**

### **A Humanist Ethic of Interfaith Cooperation - Chaplain Chris Stedman**

As a nonreligious atheist, I've been deeply informed and inspired by my relationships with religious friends and allies. But my passion for interfaith work extends beyond my personal experiences and into the very foundation of my Humanist ethics. The Humanist case for interfaith cooperation is found at the center of my worldview: in the position that it's unlikely that any divine or supernatural forces will intervene in human affairs to solve our problems. If this is so, it is ultimately up to human beings to address human problems. Thus, we have to work together: atheist and theist, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Jew, Humanist and Hindu.

This conviction—that human beings can and should work to improve the world—can unite atheists in common cause with people of all faiths and beliefs. To quote from the third edition of the Humanist Manifesto: “Humanists are concerned for the well-being of all, are committed to diversity, and respect those of differing yet humane views.” But the Humanist case for cooperation goes beyond mere necessity. As a Humanist, I believe that human beings have things to teach one another; that we can learn from people who have different experiences and beliefs. Interfaith cooperation not only humanizes our differences and lessens suspicion between communities—it teaches us that we are better together. Diversity of belief and background makes the world that much richer. Celebrating that truth is central to my Humanist ethic of interfaith cooperation.

#### **Tips when sharing your own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation in a public space:**

- Remember that you are speaking for yourselves and not for your entire tradition. There is broad diversity in every tradition and this is your personal articulation of a theology or ethic that resonates with your own experience.
- Choose just a few basic ideas to explore and provide examples that build on those ideas.
- Use stories whenever possible. Narratives provide both a helpful introduction to concepts that others might be unfamiliar with while also sharing vivid details that people can remember.
- Be careful about making your ethic or theology of interfaith cooperation overly abstract in nature. The more personal, informal, and relatable, the better.

### **A Jewish Theology of Interfaith Cooperation - Rabbi Josh Stanton**

In my tradition, it is just action that inspires belief and summons the innate desire to do good in the world. Hopefully through that action, you will come to grapple with bigger questions about life, humanity, and the sacred. I think of this most frequently, not when I am preaching from the pulpit or engaging in ritual practice, but when I am praying through service to the wider community. Once each month, I join members of my community and other congregations at the Interfaith Food Pantry of the Oranges, in a part of New Jersey that has been hit hard by economic downturn.

When packing bags of food meant to sustain people and their families throughout the month—long after their allotted food stamps have run out—I don't think about whether the recipients are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist, or any other tradition. I think about whether we are genuinely helping them and ensuring that they do not go hungry. I think about the parents who know that their children will be fed and the children who can focus on growing and learning rather than finding their next meal. Indeed, making support of the needy contingent on their religion would be unethical and contrary to important standards of Jewish ethics. The core book of Jewish principles, the Babylonian Talmud, explains, “We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace.” Over fourteen hundred years ago, our sages recognized something of key importance: by serving non-Jews in need alongside their Jewish counterparts, we not only do what is

right, but we also foster peace. Interfaith collaboration reveals the deeper Jewish call to pursue justice for all human beings. Just action inspires belief in something greater than ourselves. This can sometimes be more evident when we serve communities beyond our own.

**A current or historical example of interfaith cooperation from your background:**

### **A Hindu Theology of Interfaith Cooperation - Anand Venkatkrishnan**

One of the things I appreciate about Hinduism is its ability both to absorb and to be reshaped by otherness. It is often difficult to discern where one tradition ends and another begins; boundaries are drawn and blurred in equal measure. Buddhist monastic institutions influence the formation of Hindu ascetic orders, Jain theories of nonviolence find their way into Hindu ethical codes, and Muslim devotional practices meld with Hindu religious poetry. Hindu pilgrims seek healing at the shrines of Muslim saints, devotees sing the words of the Sikh gurus, and temple-goers make pit stops at Christian churches. In the particular Hindu tradition which I inherit, Advaita Vedanta, there is a philosophical emphasis on the essential unity of all created things. This has historically translated into the quest for unity between sects, religions, and philosophies. For example, take this verse from a hymn called the *Mohamudgara* (v.25):

God is one in both of us  
and in others as well;  
so why be intolerant?  
Why do we have these  
meaningless fights?  
If you want to be godlike  
anytime soon  
start by treating  
everyone as equals.

This verse, and the traditions it invokes, inspire me to build bridges of cooperation for the common good.

### **A Sikh Theology of Interfaith Cooperation - Rue Khalsa**

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, is one of my interfaith heroes. Guru Nanak observed intense conflict between Hindus and Muslims in 15th century India. Guru Nanak intended Sikhism to be, among other things, a third path in this context. The Sikhs' primary religious text—the Sri Guru Granth Sahib—includes writings by Hindu and Muslim saints. The Sikh's holiest shrine and central gathering place, the Golden Temple, combines Muslim and Hindu architecture and has four doors, one on each side, to symbolize that those of all faiths are welcome to enter and equal in the eyes of God.

One would be hard-pressed to find a better example of Guru Nanak's legacy in today's world than the work of Bhai Mohinder Singh. Singh's life has been fully dedicated to *seva*—service to others based in a deep and abiding Sikh spirit. One of his highest priorities has been pushing Sikh—Catholic cooperation forward by leaps and bounds. He was a driving force in the creation of the now annual bilateral Catholic-Sikh dialogue. These dialogues include theological exchanges, discussion of daily practice, and the sharing of ideas for how Sikhs and Catholics can work together in the areas of service and advocacy for the downtrodden. As Bhai Mohinder Singh has shown, the Sikh value of *seva* and the deep and abiding Catholic values of social justice are shared values between these two traditions.

**Ready to get started?** As an interfaith leader in your campus or community, take time to develop your own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation. Developing your own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation is a craft. It's an evolving story where you have multiple opportunities to articulate to your campus and community why interfaith work is important in your tradition or worldview.

*If you're interested in sharing your own theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation, email your story to [info@ifyc.org](mailto:info@ifyc.org). For more tips, check out our library of educational resources at [ifyc.org/resources](http://ifyc.org/resources).*