

Beyond Common Ground: Towards Critical Engagement in Interfaith Organizing

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As a result of increasing diversity in the United States following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, interfaith organizations strive to find common ground in order to bridge lines of difference. Based on participant-observation and interviews with participants in Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), the author presents three “common ground” narratives: common dignity, shared civic space, and inclusive identity. The author then discusses how, despite these narratives, informants critically engage with political difference, violent histories, and identity exclusions. The author then argues that participants in IWJ use the values of “common ground” narratives to guide responses to difference; they are moving past an approach of critical tolerance, which respects all beliefs, and towards an approach of “critical engagement,” which recognizes that cooperation is not always possible or productive. Rather than simply theorizing about approaches, these findings show how organizations create strategies for cooperation across lines of religious difference to achieve greater political effectiveness. They demonstrate organizational strategies for discerning which relationships effectively advance social transformation.

Keywords: interfaith, common ground, cooperation, tolerance, community organizing, social transformation

Introduction

With an increasing emphasis on addressing conflicts by bringing people together across lines of religious difference, the goals of the current and growing interfaith movement in the United States express a desire for social justice and the common good. Kim Bobo, founder of Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), describes her initial motivation to build alliances with congregations in support of the work of the labor movement: “when we engage people of faith, it will make a difference for workers, employers and the public at large.”¹ Because religious communities are seen as significant moral agents in society, she feels that their active presence is necessary to supporting social justice movements.

In order to develop many relationships and involve more faith communities, IWJ attempts to assert that all religions share a belief in justice, but such a broad generalization can be dangerously inaccurate, as religions are varied and nuanced internally. For example, Buddhism has long been thought of by Westerners as a peaceful religion or philosophy; many Buddhists in the United States have used Buddhism to advocate for peace. Yet in Sri Lanka, Buddhism has been used to advocate for extreme violence against the ethnic and religious minority of Tamil Hindus, and nationalist Buddhists in Myanmar have waged a genocide against the Rohingya Muslim minority.² Religions are both externally and internally diverse and can be used to advocate for directly opposed societal structures. Many scholars even condemn the interfaith movement for

¹ Joseph A. McCartin, “Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement: Kim Bobo’s Story,” *Labor* 6, no. 1 (March 20, 2009): 98, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-2008-046>.

² Mikael Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Globalized Imaginaries of Endangered Identities,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2015.1008090>.

ignoring the differences among and between religions. In light of these points, the question remains: why and how does IWJ use the rhetoric of “common ground” as a strategy for political momentum?

In the recent edited volume *Religion and Progressive Activism: New Stories about Faith and Politics*, the contributors seek to complicate narratives concerning faith-based involvement in politics and civic life.³ Recognizing that much of the anxiety in the United States concerning the involvement of faith in politics comes from concerns about conservative religious voices, their volume turns attention to progressive faith voices involved in the public sphere and the religious underpinnings of many progressive causes.⁴ One of the main tasks of this book is to redefine progressive religion, identifying its four dimensions (progressive action, values, identities, and theology), which appear in various combinations, to highlight the fluid nature of religious and political labels.⁵ As these dimensions do not evolve in a vacuum, the contributors show how there is a spectrum of the levels of involvement for religious communities engaging in progressive social action. Thus, their book gives real examples of the various ways religious communities in the twenty-first century are engaging in progressive action, to help progressive activists recognize their partners in the work and develop productive relationships.

In this essay, I explore how participants in IWJ articulate and respond to lines of difference within faith-based community organizing efforts. This analysis follows the approach of *Religion and Progressive Activism*'s editors by situating itself in real contemporary examples of faith-based community organizing that complicate simplistic narratives. I argue that participants in interfaith organizations use narratives of “common ground” to guide their progressive values so that they can respond ethically to difference, moving past a theory of critical tolerance and towards a practice that I call “critical engagement.”⁶ First, I describe the three different “common ground” narratives that IWJ uses to build interfaith coalitions: *common dignity*, *shared civic space*, and *inclusive identity*. Then, after describing the scholarly critique of such narratives, I show how participants in IWJ actively problematize their own narratives by critically engaging *political difference*, *violent histories*, and *identity exclusions*. Rather than theorizing or evaluating the public values and actions of an interfaith organization, this analysis presents the ways that participants in interfaith work engage critically across lines of difference to discern which relationships would enhance their advocacy for a just society.

This article is part of a larger research project examining the faith-based non-profit Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), a national organization that aims to mobilize and train faith communities in support of workers and workers’ rights. It operates as a national organization through sixty local affiliates, including both interfaith coalitions and worker centers around the country. The purpose of the interfaith coalitions is to tap into local faith communities and mobilize their influence for advocacy or education around labor justice issues, while the purpose of the worker centers is to organize and educate workers about their rights. Over the course of two months I conducted participant-observation research and interviews with IWJ. I collected data from three affiliates (in Madison, WI; Memphis, TN; and Boston, MA) and conducted fifty-four

³ Ruth Braunstein, Todd Nicholas Fuist, and Rhys H. Williams, eds., *Religion and Progressive Activism: New Stories About Faith and Politics* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction through Cases* (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2008).

semi-structured interviews with board members, staff, and volunteers at the national and local levels. The data was transcribed and coded to identify common structural approaches to organizing across lines of difference and strategies to engage faith communities in social justice action. Elon University's Institutional Review Board approved the research methods of this project. All of the informants cited in this article agreed to have their real names used.

Evolving Approaches to Religious Difference

Although many cite the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 as the beginning of pluralism and the modern interfaith movement in the United States, the history of this country has been one of encounter with the culturally, ethnically, and religiously “other” since its beginning.⁷ These original encounters of difference, though, were controlled and suppressed by the power of white Protestants. For example, instead of engaging with the cultures and religions of Native Americans, after pursuing a near complete genocide, the United States government placed many Native American children in boarding schools where they could not contact their families, speak their languages, or practice their religions. Similarly, African slaves were often prohibited from having their own religious services and forced to attend church services where white preachers emphasized Bible lessons about obedience and servitude.⁸ Despite the fact that many white Protestants were fleeing intolerance and persecution in coming to the American colonies, they often used their power to attempt to strip other ethnic groups of their religious traditions and to teach a Christianity that served their own purposes.

In 1893, however, as part of the World's Columbian Exposition to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus “discovering” America, religious leaders and scholars from around the world gathered together in Chicago for the World's Parliament of Religions. Despite being dominantly Christian in representation and imagery, with 152 of 194 papers presented by English-speaking Christians, representatives from the “ten great world religions—Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” gathered together for seventeen days of speeches, addresses, and hymn singing.⁹ It was the first time in United States history that white Christian men had intentionally invited people into the country to share their different beliefs and worldviews on a seemingly equal platform. The pluralism celebrated at the Parliament, however, was largely a Christian perennialism, which claimed that religious differences are insignificant and that each religion worships the same (Christian) God with only various cultural differences.

Religion scholar Kate McCarthy's 2007 *Interfaith Encounters in America* offers perhaps the first comprehensive map of interfaith relations and multifaith activism in the United States. McCarthy identifies three categories of interfaith encounter: practical work for social healing, spiritual work for interior transformation, and conceptual and academic work for truth-seeking.¹⁰ She writes: “Each context involves difference structures of accountability, levels of investment, and unique

⁷ Derek Michaud, “World Parliament of Religions, 1893,” *Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology*, accessed February 6, 2018, <http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/bce/worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm>.

⁸ Peter Randolph, “Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 63–68.

⁹ Michaud, “World Parliament of Religions.”

¹⁰ Kate McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 20–22.

conditions that foster or inhibit genuine dialogical encounter.”¹¹ Clearly interfaith relations have developed since the 1893 World Parliament of Religions; many different organizations and institutions now employ interfaith methods to address a variety of goals. McCarthy describes how a modern understanding of pluralism differs greatly from the first Parliament. None of the groups she researched were “moving toward or advocating a single syncretic worldview,” but rather they “firmly disavow such a concept.”¹² Rather than oppressing difference or claiming that all religions are essentially a perverted version of Christianity, in the early twenty-first century, interfaith relations seek to accept and understand religious difference.

After the Boston marathon bombing in 2013, Eboo Patel, founder and director of the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) and a major figurehead of the interfaith movement, published an article stating that this tragedy had occurred because of the lack of emphasis on interfaith engagement, which focuses on finding common ground, in the United States.¹³ According to Patel, interfaith engagement helps people come to terms with intersectional identities, separates the bad aspects of religions from the good for society, and reminds citizens that America welcomes diversity and pluralistic cooperation. Patel believes that the value of interfaith dialogue extends beyond simply understanding, and offers significant benefits to society.

Religion scholar Lucia Hulsether responded by arguing that the interfaith model of IFYC does not actually pacify religious violence or strengthen society.¹⁴ Rather, it ignores many factors that contribute to violence by focusing on the “religious” aspect of the conflict, promotes polarizing binaries, is inherently nationalistic, and hides other clandestine goals of the organization. Hulsether highlights what Patel seems to omit: interfaith relations are not inherently good. Rather, participants in interfaith work should be careful and critical about the methods and narratives that they use or their work might actually be contributing negatively to society. Each institution or organization makes conscious decisions about the purposes and methods of their interfaith approach.

Understanding the interfaith movement as one of engagement rather than disregard for difference is the foundation of IWJ’s approach. They have published online resources that explain how, based on scriptures and holy teachings, different religious traditions and denominations advocate for worker justice. This model reflects Diana Eck’s understanding of modern pluralism. Eck, professor of religions at Harvard University and founder of the Pluralism Project, advocates for engagement across lines of difference rather than simple demographic diversity.¹⁵ Modern pluralism includes the recognition of the various ways that religious communities present themselves and engage with the “secular” structures of the world as well as responding to the specific histories of oppression that those communities have faced.

¹¹ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters*, 198.

¹² McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters*, 208.

¹³ Eboo Patel, “3 Reasons Why Interfaith Efforts Matter More Than Ever,” *The Huffington Post*, April 23, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eboo-patel/3-reasons-interfaith-efforts-matter-more-than-ever_b_3134795.html.

¹⁴ Lucia Hulsether, “Can Interfaith Dialogue Cure Religious Violence?,” *Religion Dispatches*, April 26, 2013, <http://religiondispatches.org/can-interfaith-dialogue-cure-religious-violence>.

¹⁵ Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 22.

Additionally, IWJ views interfaith relations as a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself; it is a means for social justice. In order to truly transform society as they desire, IWJ's efforts must reflect the diverse and pluralistic nature of the country and the complicated dynamics that entails. As Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty describe in *To Do Justice: a Guide for Progressive Christians*, progressive religious activism must consider that the purpose of the United States' pluralistic democracy is to allow for the input of a variety of voices and perspectives so that one faith, or race, or sex, etc. does not dominate.¹⁶ Allowing different voices to speak in different ways means creating spaces in new ways that allow for the contributions of these communities as well as reimagining what cooperation looks like. In response to this new social context of the United States, IWJ attempts to strategically engage a pluralistic democracy in order to advocate effectively for social transformation. One of these strategies for engagement includes using narratives of "common ground" for greater political involvement across lines of difference.

Common Ground Narratives

My data analysis found three different ways that people invoke the rhetoric of common ground: *common dignity*, *shared civic space*, and *inclusive identity*.

Common Dignity

The first narrative is one of common dignity. Julian Medrano, born in Argentina and raised in Canada, has now worked in Chicago for over five years as the Director of Public Policy for IWJ National. He believes that they can do their work as an interfaith organization because there are "bedrock values that are important to everybody [so] we can really bring people together to fight for and actually hopefully make some sort of impact."¹⁷ He went on to describe how these values are true not only in Abrahamic religions, but "across Buddhism and Hinduism" as well. When I asked further what these values are, he explained that he meant a common humanity, "dignity and respect to all other human beings."¹⁸ This was the most common of the narratives, shared at both national and local level among board members, staff, and volunteers. This narrative states that all people deserve dignity and that the way contemporary workers are being treated does not allow them to live with dignity. One intern at the Boston affiliate office, Audrey Crawley, who is pursuing a Master of Divinity degree from the Boston University School of Theology, explained to me:

The pursuit of [economic justice] through workers' rights is a very clear, and, it feels, direct path to fulfilling this spiritual, theological, ethical, moral commitment that [people of faith] have towards justice, and also merging the idea of 'treating people with dignity' and 'everyone has the image of God within them.'¹⁹

Many of my Christian informants in particular referenced the idea of "Imago Dei," or the theology that each human is made in the image of God and should thus be treated well. Such a theology also parallels the spiritual meaning of the Hindu greeting "Namaste," which means, "the god in me bows to the god in you." Such a greeting reflects the religious belief that each individual

¹⁶ Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty, *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), xx.

¹⁷ Julian Medrano, interview with author, Chicago, IL, June 11, 2018.

¹⁸ Medrano interview.

¹⁹ Audrey Crawley, interview with author, Boston, MA, July 16, 2018.

contains and reflects divinity and should be thus treated with the appropriate dignity and respect. These examples show how the various religious traditions use their own specific theologies and beliefs to express a similar sentiment of common dignity that informs their desire to engage in social justice work.

Many informants spent a significant portion of their interview telling personal stories of various injustices against workers and how dignity is being taken away from them. Senior National Field Organizer Martha Ojeda, who spent years helping to organize workers in Mexico to advocate for better conditions, described some of the situations that she has seen in her international organizing history:

We have domestic workers that are in unsafe working conditions in terms of sexual harassment, discrimination, all those things, and worker wages of \$2.30 an hour. They don't know about the law, they don't know that they have the right to get the minimum wage. So then the employees get abused and the employers take away the things.²⁰

Ojeda, along with other participants, described all the indignities of sweatshops, from sexual harassment to labor trafficking to a wage of less than \$3 per hour. IWJ participants believe that by perpetuating injustice, society inhibits individuals from fulfilling this ideal of dignified life. In response, people of faith are motivated to work towards social transformation so that all may live with dignity. They believe all religions teach that each person deserves dignity, and thus desire for all individuals to be treated with dignity. Therefore, participants in IWJ are willing to cross lines of difference to reach that goal. Significantly, as the narrative emphasizes that these values are true for everyone, participants can recruit anyone to share in the work.

Shared Civic Space

The second narrative is one of shared civic space. For example, Reverend Darrell Hamilton, who serves currently as the Pastor of Formation and Outreach at the First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain in Boston and recently became involved with MassIWJ, the Massachusetts affiliate of IWJ, quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”²¹ In other words, this informant recognizes that injustice in society towards workers does not only affect the workers. As he described matters, “the individual affects the community and the community affects the individual.”²² Some individuals may be visibly negatively impacted and minoritized. Others are internally impacted because through complicity with injustices, they cannot fully live out their faith commitments and moral agency.²³ Therefore, societies that are unjust negatively impact all the individuals within the community. The health and wellbeing of minoritized groups within society is tied to the humanity of privileged groups.²⁴

²⁰ Martha Ojeda, interview with author, virtual, July 23, 2018.

²¹ Darrell Hamilton, interview with author, Boston, MA, July 20, 2018.

²² Hamilton interview.

²³ Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 45.

²⁴ Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 45.

This narrative of common ground is also the one that Eboo Patel uses. As one of the most prominent figures in the current interfaith movement, he says that people need to work together and be willing to cross lines of religious difference because we share one nation. “The central problem interfaith work seeks to solve is this,” he writes: “How are all of us, with our deep differences, to share a nation and a world together? I believe that is primarily a question of civic space, not political ideology.”²⁵ He describes how individuals, though they disagree on various issues, should be able to create a society in which they can all live full and healthy lives. By cooperating across lines of difference, we can make a country that is better for all of us to live in. Thus, as this narrative emphasizes that all individuals in a community are affected by injustice, each person can and should join in the work for a more just society.

Inclusive Identity

The final narrative that IWJ participants used is one of inclusive identity. This narrative is a direct response to the politically polarized context of the United States. A significant majority of my informants labeled themselves either a “Democrat” or an “Independent (but vote Democrat).” In other words, they might not fully support the Democratic platform, but they specify that they oppose the Republican platform. A political identity that opposes anti-union legislation is significant for my informants, especially since more states have become “right to work” states in recent years and since the 2018 *Janus vs. AFSCME* Supreme Court case made the entire public sector in the United States “right to work.”²⁶ They see conservatism as divisive and exclusive; it is elite and beneficial only for people of significant privilege. They intentionally and publicly seek to position their identity in direct opposition to conservative values. In other words, participants in IWJ desire to create an organization that invites all people, not just the elite, to work for the common good.

Describing the weekly meetings at the Beloved Community Center (BCC) in Greensboro, North Carolina, Terence “TC” Muhammad, an African American Muslim who also works as the Community Outreach Manager for the Hip-Hop Caucus, explains:

We don't ask ‘are you're white, black, straight, gay, Muslim, Christian?’... We don't ask all that. We ask, ‘Hey. How are you? What's your name? What's on your mind today?’ So it's a space where we allow you to let us know who you are and what is going in your mind. The Beloved [Community Center] welcomes all people.²⁷

Muhammad is demonstrating the ethic of the BCC: that all people are welcome to come wholly as they are without being classified into categories. The humanity of the participants is validated

²⁵ Patel, “3 Reasons Why Interfaith Efforts Matter More Than Ever.”

²⁶ Anti-worker and anti-union legislation normally occurs at the state or city level. Tennessee became a “right to work” state in 1947, Wisconsin passed such legislation in 2015, and Massachusetts does not have such laws at this time. My informants mentioned local worker concerns such as 1) the historic Sanitation Workers’ Strike in Memphis, TN in 1968; 2) Act 10, signed by Governor Scott Walker, which sparked the Wisconsin Uprisings in Madison, WI in 2011; and 3) current healthcare reform for SEIU security guards and airport workers in Boston, MA.

²⁷ Terence Muhammad, interview with author, Greensboro, NC, April, 6, 2018. The Beloved Community Center is another affiliate of IWJ and like MassIWJ, they have regular member meetings for the community. During the spring semester of 2018, I attended the weekly meetings and conducted six semi-structured interviews as preparation for the immersive ethnographic work I did the following summer.

before any categories are assigned. While he might not ask the specific identities of those who enter the community space, Muhammad still recognizes that these significantly influence the individual. Rather than telling them which should be most influential, though, the staff at the BCC allows the community members the agency to choose and express their identities and what those identities mean for them in that moment. In the many weekly meetings I attended, I witnessed people speaking from their own experiences, feeling comfortable situating the community issues that they wanted to discuss within the premise of their own experiences and identities.

Anyone who cares about worker justice is welcome to participate with IWJ. The organization strives to be a space where everyone is welcome. Those who have historically been marginalized and silenced, like people of color, people in the LGBTQIA community, and non-Christians, among others, have space within IWJ. This inclusiveness means that everyone has a voice and role within their organization, which they assert makes it a stronger organization. Since this narrative emphasizes that everyone has a space, it means that more of the community is able to join their cause.

Each of these three narratives exists to create a space in which those who are religiously diverse can work together for the specific cause of worker justice. The first narrative strategically emphasizes faith teachings support advocacy for workers, maintaining that multiple paths lead to the same goal. The second narrative emphasizes the physical space that community members share and how injustice affects all in that community. Therefore, individuals again should have a shared goal for a shared space. The final narrative focuses on a space in which all people, no matter their identities, are welcomed, meaning that everyone should join to contribute their own voices. The strategy for all of these narratives is similar: to get as many people as possible, across lines of difference, involved in the cause of worker justice because the more people, the stronger their voices.

Scholars’ Critique

While, like many other interfaith organizations, IWJ emphasizes the possibility of bringing people together across lines of religious difference to advocate for social justice, many scholars critique this method. In their article “Constructing Interreligious Studies: Thinking Critically about Interfaith Studies and the Interfaith Movement,” Amy Allocco, Brian Pennington, and Geoff Claussen lay their concerns bare:

We are concerned that valorizing civic cooperation above all else provides fertile ground for essentialism and generalization, fails to fully engage with histories of interreligious conflict, and unwittingly provides cover for the secular nation-state, hegemonic forms of Christianity, the globalizing capitalist order, and other systems and approaches that are in fact responsible for many of the tensions that the interfaith movement aims to address.²⁸

²⁸ Amy Allocco, Geoffrey Claussen, and Brian Pennington, “Constructing Interreligious Studies: Thinking Critically about Interfaith Studies and the Interfaith Movement,” in *Interreligious-interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Peace, and Noah Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 1.

Their argument is that interfaith initiatives gloss over differences that are important and have historically caused violent interchanges. Allocco et al. express concern that the ways in which the interfaith movement addresses difference, rather than understanding nuance and engaging critically with those differences, actually has potential to be dangerous. Simply stating that Christianity or Buddhism or Hinduism believes in “justice” inaccurately generalizes the essence of an entire religious tradition, since those religions, along with many others, have also been used to perpetuate injustice. Such comments ignore the past histories and present realities of violence with religious justification. Further, the format of many interfaith programs often perpetuates normative institutions, like the nation-state, Christianity, and capitalism.

These concerns reflect the issues raised by other scholars such as Hulsether, who expresses concern over the reductive approach of dominant interfaith efforts, which can lead to inaccurate binaries of “good” versus “bad” religion and become a nation-building project that elevates American-ness over all other identities.²⁹ Similarly, IWJ’s “common ground” narratives can also seem simplistic, claiming uniformity of beliefs and the possibility for cooperation across all lines of difference. The message of these scholars is clear: engaging in interfaith work without a critical eye can have detrimental effects.

Scholar of religion Gary E. Kessler might encourage participants in interfaith organizations to employ critical tolerance, emphasizing the analytical lens of Allocco et al., but also recognizing the importance of respect across lines of difference. This approach, rather than asserting the positive essence of all religions, presupposes that engaging with different religions will include disagreement.³⁰ In explaining critical tolerance, Kessler emphasizes that “tolerance does not imply that we should never make critical judgments, be they positive or negative” nor does it “compel us to accept as true everything others do or believe.”³¹ Scholars and responsible citizens should not take everything at face value nor give in to a theory of absolute relativity in which there is no way to determine good and bad.

I argue, though, that IWJ participants move past Kessler’s critical *tolerance* towards critical *engagement*. While both modes share the above-mentioned analytical lens, my notion of critical engagement does not call for respect for all beliefs. In advocating for understanding, Kessler calls for scholars to “truly respect the views of others” rather than representing them as “stupid, unreasonable, and even dangerous.”³² On the other hand, critical engagement recognizes that some worldviews and beliefs, such as white supremacy, sexism, and Islamophobia, to mention just a few, are indeed dangerous. While one might theoretically understand the roots of these beliefs and see the humanity of those who hold them, dehumanizing beliefs need not be respected and should not be tolerated. Critical engagement means that scholars and activists can and do make judgments about their collaborators. Activists can selectively discern, as they structure organizations, specific events, and professional relationships, with whom they will cooperate and what forms that cooperation will take, in order to ethically and effectively advocate for a more just society in accordance with their progressive values.

²⁹ Hulsether, “Can Interfaith Dialogue Cure Religious Violence?”

³⁰ Kessler, *Studying Religion*, 315.

³¹ Kessler, *Studying Religion*, 314–315.

³² Kessler, *Studying Religion*, 315.

Engaging Difference

In the following section of this article, I show how individuals within IWJ address difference and conflict. While they might project a façade of “valorizing civic cooperation above all else,”³³ especially in their “common ground” rhetoric, my informants actually did grapple with differences and conflict. While they publicly and consciously strive to work together across many lines of difference, they still pragmatically engaged critically with those differences. In IWJ’s response to difference, as it arose within their organization, I observed three distinct differences that they addressed in different ways: *political differences*, *violent histories*, and *identity exclusions*. The ways in which IWJ addresses these differences show a move beyond critical tolerance towards critical engagement.

Political Differences

Perhaps the simplest point of contention is *political difference*, in which individuals and communities disagree on what legislation should be supported regarding hot-button political issues. In describing why, when founding the organization, she chose to structure IWJ in a way that focuses specifically on workers’ rights, Kim Bobo explains that, because other issues are divisive, their coalition would not be able to be productive on those issues. In her own words, she says,

There are these issues that ... the faith community just doesn't agree on them. Whether it's gay marriage or women in ministry or Israel/Palestine. Those are very divisive issues. Or abortion, right? That's the other big one. And so, honestly, I stay away from them. Because ... people are not going to agree on them.... I don't mind if people have conversations on them, but we can't work on those things. We can't work on them together because we don't agree.³⁴

In other words, Bobo recognizes that among and between faith communities there are places of disagreement that influence their stances on political issues. She believes that a pro-choice or pro-life interfaith coalition that specifically uses faith perspectives as their ground for moral political authority would simply not be effective. Such a coalition would spend too much time and resources on internal debates instead of accomplishing systemic or legislative change.

That being said, Bobo does recognize that the process of working together for labor rights often provides participants with a rare chance to talk about contentious issues. Rather than perpetuating the polarized political environment of the United States through their established relationships, participants can learn about different faith perspectives on a particular topic. While making signs for a workers’ rights rally, for example, participants may be able to discuss their personal stances on abortion. Because IWJ consciously made the strategic decision to address non-divisive issues, it is clear that they are aware that there are other issues that prohibit civic cooperation. Rather than asking individuals to abandon their morals in order to work on polarized and polarizing issues, they simply avoid them altogether, at least publicly. Again, this is not directly addressed by the organization, but the relationships formed through cooperation do allow a medium through which individuals may address difference on a micro-level.

³³ Allocco et al, “Constructing Interreligious Studies,” 1.

³⁴ Kim Bobo, interview with author, Richmond, VA, July 13, 2018.

This informal acknowledgement of political difference is key within their narrative of common dignity. That narrative espouses the concept that all humans have dignity, yet religious communities do not always agree on the definition of a human being (especially prenatals).³⁵ While they can agree on what human dignity should look like for workers, this common belief does not necessarily translate to other political issues. On issues such as abortion and women in the ministry, participants may be able to tolerate differences, agree to disagree, and focus on working together in favor of a living wage or the right to a union. They are aware of differences and engage them at the individual level, but choose to bracket them on an organizational level and divert their focus to working collaboratively on only shared causes.

Violent Histories

A more complicated difference is one of violent histories, where there have been violent conflicts between two religious groups in the past that even continue into the present. Unlike political difference, these cannot simply be ignored for the sake of civic cooperation.

One insightful story that shows how people engage this difference within IWJ comes from two Jewish informants in Madison, Wisconsin. With the intention of demonstrating unity among different religious groups, a Christian pastor in the area wanted to have an interfaith worship service. The service included communion and the pastor asked a converted Jewish organizer whose position was to foster relationships with faith communities with what was then the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice of South Central Wisconsin (ICWJ), Becky Schigiel, to hold the communion cup at this service. Schigiel was fine with this request, more than happy to help in an effort to display interfaith unity.³⁶ Rabbi Renee Bauer, who was the Executive Director for ICWJ, on the other hand, was not pleased: “it was all a lovely goal, but it was really inappropriate.”³⁷ She called up the pastor and had a long conversation with him about how it wasn’t an appropriate request nor was communion appropriate in an interfaith worship service. This had to do, of course, with how communion is typically an exclusive act of Christian worship—something that only baptized Christians or sometimes even only members of a specific denomination can take part in. Furthermore, given the history of Christian persecution of Jews for “causing the death of Jesus” and recognizing that communion represents this act of death and resurrection, this pastor was asking a Jewish person to hold a symbol that is both exclusive and representative of the persecution of Jews. In response to this conversation, the organizing pastor canceled the event.

Even though the “common ground” narratives make it seem as though participants gloss over differences in their pursuit of civic cooperation, this example makes clear that they do critically assess their engagement with each other. Rabbi Bauer understood the theological implications of the pastor’s request, and critically grasped how that connected to a violent history of Christians persecuting Jews. Because she had a relationship with that pastor, she was able to call him up and confront him about something that he had not realized or considered. He accepted the critique.

³⁵ Rebecca Todd Peters, *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018). As language is political, I use this term as Peters does, attempting to avoid language that is overly scientific and used by pro-choice advocates, like “embryo,” or personal and used by pro-life advocates, like “baby.”

³⁶ Becky Schigiel, interview with author, Madison, WI, June 18, 2018.

³⁷ Renee Bauer, interview with author, Madison, WI, June 20, 2018.

By having individuals working together, differences arise and are addressed in the planning process, which the public often does not see.

IWJ recognizes that within shared spaces, distinct demographic groups are affected by historic injustice in differing ways. It therefore strives to engage in interfaith work with an appropriate level of sensitivity to power dynamics and comes together where it can. For example, when MassIWJ asked its partnering congregations to sign a petition in support of raising the minimum wage, which affects all workers equally, the violent histories between Jews and Christians were relatively irrelevant and the congregations were able to cooperate easily. However, when the Christian pastor asked the Jewish organizer to take part in an interfaith communion ceremony, the violent history of Christian antisemitism could not be ignored. In this case, it wasn't simply a matter of a political difference from an equal platform in a shared space, but rather a re-inscription of the oppressive power dynamic of Christian hegemony over and above Jewish identity, but because of the established relationship the issue was addressed and resolved quickly.

Identity Exclusion

Finally, there are also instances of identity exclusion, when some potential partners refuse to work with an organizer or with IWJ on the basis of their faith. The most common example has to do with religious stances on LGBTQIA matters.

Gay and transgender inclusion are divisive topics within faith communities. Edie Love, for example, is a Unitarian Universalist minister in Memphis who is openly queer and has a transgender child. She describes how not everyone is willing to work with her: “Generally people who feel that strongly on a conservative evangelical bent don't engage with me. They just don't.”³⁸ Participants in IWJ who are heterosexual, cis-gendered, support same-sex marriage, and oppose legislation restricting use of gender-specific facilities might temporarily bracket or tone down their progressive views when working with more conservative collaborators. Or they might be able to work alongside each other and informally discuss their differing views on LGBTQIA matters at a theoretical level, as in the case of abortion, mentioned above. However, individuals who deny the legitimacy of queer identities occasionally refuse to cooperate with Love altogether because she is openly queer.

There can be challenges because I'm an out lesbian minister in itself. There are people who will not work with me because they don't believe women should be ministers or they don't believe gay people should be ministers. So, that is an issue that has come up, but the people that I work with accept me for who I am and I accept them for who they are. I'm not going to try to scold somebody for their beliefs, and I would hope that they're not going to do that to me, either.³⁹

Love works with anyone who will work with her, but if they are unwilling to accept her identities, then that is a relationship that she will not pursue. As part of its inclusive identity, IWJ would not expect her to closet herself or hide her child in order to advocate for worker justice. As such, IWJ forfeits relationships with conservative faith communities who will not accept individuals

³⁸ Edie Love, interview with author, virtual, June 28, 2018.

³⁹ Love interview.

of all sexual and gender identities. Again, there is a public façade and inclusive narrative that IWJ values civic cooperation to the extent that they do not critically engage difference, but this is untrue. IWJ participants hold progressive values of inclusion and cooperation, as represented in the previously described “common ground” narratives, which they are not willing to sacrifice in order to engage conservative communities. These conflicts occur at the micro-level, interpersonally and at the planning and relationship building stages. As such, it is clear that IWJ does engage critically with difference, though they do not publicly advertise the differences that merit exclusion.

This willingness to exclude certain groups, like those that deny the legitimacy of queer identities, seems to directly contradict the IWJ narrative of inclusive identity. They recognize the areas where ethical boundaries must be drawn. Instead of asking Love to engage with individuals who are hostile to her, they would forfeit those relationships. They would not ask her to tolerate or respect views that deny her human dignity.

Similarly, IWJ would not ask those communities who refuse to engage with LGBTQIA folks to put aside those thoughts or opinions. IWJ participants do not claim that other groups are simply ignorant and need to be educated. Rather than choose to engage these communities in order to educate them, they understand that these beliefs are deeply held. Trying to force engagement would create a toxic relationship on both sides. On the one hand, the minoritized community members of IWJ would not feel safe or valued. On the other hand, the evangelical or conservative communities would feel like their beliefs are being belittled and rejected. These feelings do not make for a healthy or productive relationship. In these situations, respect of a different opinion is impossible and tolerance of their opinion is not necessary.

Because they critically assess where engagement is possible, the IWJ narrative of inclusive identity comes with a cost. As with areas of political differences and with communities who have a history of violence directed against them, IWJ staff members make critical value judgments concerning where civic cooperation is still possible and where there are ethical boundaries that should not be crossed. Through an analytical lens, they decide where to engage and where respect for beliefs that contradict the progressive values of the organization is not possible, employing critical engagement.

Conclusion: Towards an Ethic of Critical Engagement

Despite the scholarly concern that interfaith organizations “valorize civic cooperation above all else,” it is clear that this is not actually IWJ’s approach. Through engagement across lines of difference, individuals critically assess their cooperation. The strategic choice to focus on areas of agreement in no way means that areas of disagreement are forgotten. Additionally, participants speak up when they recognize that hegemony is being perpetuated or violent histories are being forgotten. But these areas of difference are engaged at interpersonal, micro-levels rather than in group rhetoric. As they consciously exclude communities who will not engage with their inclusive identity, there are, indeed, boundaries to their willingness to cooperate. This selective collaboration with only those individuals and faith communities that can work effectively together in healthy ways in order to advance progressive causes is critical engagement.

The three areas of difference that IWJ participants respond to show that they employ a strategy of critical engagement rather than critical tolerance. There are areas of political difference

where tolerance is possible; individuals can ignore areas of disagreement in order to focus on the cause for which they are working. At another level, though, participants within IWJ recognize the unequal power dynamics of cooperation efforts in the United States between minoritized religious traditions and Christianity, dynamics that come from histories and contemporary realities of oppression. They do not ask for minoritized communities to uncritically engage in these efforts, but rather respond to the critiques of those communities. Individuals within IWJ also recognize unequal power dynamics of cooperation and ethical boundaries in which cooperation is not possible. IWJ recognizes certain ethical boundaries, like identity exclusions, that they do not ask their participants or other communities to cross. These are areas where they have decided that they would rather exclude communities than compromise their ethical values or force involvement with partners where a healthy relationship would not be generated.

Rather than asking participants to tolerate beliefs that reject their own humanity, the organization accepts that not all partnerships are productive. Even though they have public narratives that emphasize cooperation, privately and on a case-by-case basis, the organization critically assesses partnerships. First they decide whether or not a relationship would be mutually healthy and helpful. Recognizing that it is acceptable and even advisable not to work with everyone, they then navigate how the cooperation might occur, while acknowledging power dynamics and political differences. As such, moving past critical tolerance towards critical engagement, while still maintaining an ideal of civic cooperation, allows activists to more ethically and effectively advocate for social justice.

Though they assess which relationships are helpful and choose with whom and how to engage, or not, the narratives of “common ground” that are strategically employed to foster greater involvement within the community are still valuable. Externally, these narratives share with the public the objective of IWJ and help them to visualize what a just and healthy society would look like. They set an aspirational vision for the future. Internally, these narratives guide the organization and set ideals. Participants strive for cooperation and civic cooperation is the goal, if and when possible, even when it is difficult. They desire to work for relationships across lines of difference, yet in social justice work, they inevitably engage with difference. Their goal is a just society in which everyone can work together, but they make significant decisions about where and when and how cooperation is or is not possible. These progressive values of cooperation and inclusion contained in “common ground” narratives guide the decisions made concerning the productivity of relationships; exclusions are not based simply on disagreements or identity differences, but on significant value differences.

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