The Interfaith Society: A Durkheimian Analysis of Interfaith Engagement

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Interfaith groups can be fruitfully interpreted through a Durkheimian framework as moral communities gathered on the basis of shared values and ritualistic discourses. The function of the interfaith society is to generate social solidarity through the invocation of their commonly held sacred values in a variety of modalities that can be considered the "denominations" of the interfaith "religion." One consequence of understanding interfaith communities in this light is that it deprioritizes questions about the social impact or concrete results of interfaith engagement, as interfaith work becomes less about producing results and more about developing meaningful relationships that are not subject to proof or quantification. Rather than a change agent, interfaith dialogue is actually an emergent form of multi-religious moral community, an enactment of European cosmopolitanism which attracts mostly people who already agree with each other about the value of pluralism. This argument is grounded in ethnographic data on interfaith engagement in Rome, Italy.

Keywords: Religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, sacred values, social change, ethnography, Rome, contemporary Italy, Durkheim, social impact

Introduction

In March 2015, an interfaith discussion panel was held in Rome near the Pantheon, in the library of the Italian Camera dei Deputati [House of Representatives]. The speakers, representing dialogue-focused organizations, municipal offices and various religious groups, emphasized the importance of facilitating common ground across social divides, and teaching appreciation for diversity and its richness—but very few spoke with critical realism about *how* to do it. Few speakers recounted strategies or achievements in these areas. Questions from the audience were theoretical, not practical. Even speakers who insisted that interfaith programs must be planned to be effective—and deliver measurable impacts—skirted the issue of how to measure and evaluate the social impact of interfaith dialogues. A dissonance emerged between the emphasis on effective social change, and the lack of clear change indicators or transformation strategies.

One interfaith leader, the former president of Rome's recently formed Progressive Jewish community, departed from the other speakers. She spoke not of finding solutions to interfaith problems, but about *building meaningful relationships.* After the event, when I asked about her experience of the event, she replied, "It was interesting, but I didn't learn much. I never learn much at these things. It's just to be seen and heard and to reinforce the same ideas. But it's always nice to see everyone." This interfaith leader was less concerned about the transformative potential of interfaith dialogue, and more invested in the worthwhile meaningfulness of interfaith work and the relationships that come from it. Her perspective led to a major insight into Rome's interfaith society as a *social* phenomenon, which exists and endures as an act of solidarity and an end in itself. Despite frequent discourse about changing the world, Rome's interfaith society is more helpfully evaluated as a moral community that holds social impact as a central value—but not necessarily a clear action. While social impact may be a favorable byproduct of the community, it is in fact the *community of interfaithers and their dialogue* that are the foremost products of interfaith dialogue.

The interfaith world of Rome is a world populated by affiliates of various religions, who strengthen their social bonds through their central ritual practice: discourse. In the structured

discursive spaces of interfaith dialogue, participants define and discuss pluralism and social change, unity and hope. The discursive world of interfaith engagement can be thought of as its own moral society, binding participants to a shared values framework and to each other, as they invoke totemic sacred ideals of unity and transformation, and together construct distinct claims about the potentials and moral rightness of interfaith encounters. I came to call this network the "interfaith society" of Rome, diverse in its forms and social classes and motives, but unified by what many participants referred to as "universal values." Understanding Rome's interfaith society begins with the premise that it is best interpreted as a form of religion, in the "Durkheimian" view.

Methodology[1]

This analysis is grounded in eighteen months of ethnographic participant-observation at interfaith organizations in Rome, chiefly the interfaith program office and magazine *Confronti*, and then about twelve other interfaith groups. I held sixty-nine semi-structured two-hour interviews in Rome, mostly in Italian and sometimes in English. I engaged ethnographic methodologies of participant-observation, interviews, and photo elicitation.[2] I asked interfaithers about religious diversity and pluralism, the specific history of dialogue in Rome; about the main "players" in the constellation of dialogue organizations and leaders in town; and about the interactions between different institutional, grassroots and NGO "levels" of dialogue. Asking interfaithers what practicing dialogue means to them revealed the worldview that shapes and is shaped by interfaith engagement.

Given the study's context in Rome, where there is a preponderance of Roman Catholic spaces and resources, this research reflects the overwhelmingly Christian affiliation of Rome's interfaith society, but it does not privilege Christian perspectives or leadership. Catholic affiliation in Italy is claimed by a vast majority of the population, hovering around seventy-five percent of the population, although that number is rife with nuances of who "practices" Catholicism and who merely espouses a non-practicing cultural belonging. As a whole, the Roman interfaith society

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[2] All names and identifying details have been anonymized. Interviews were semi-structured, meaning that questions were often asked out of order, delved into more deeply if needed, or discarded if they seemed irrelevant. Interview questions, developed both in the pre-research preparation process and during fieldwork in a reflective and interrogative stance, were asked during approximately two-hour interviews with individuals in the four sub-sample groups referred to as Confronti staff, Confronti affiliates, Roman interfaithers, and Typical Romans. Confronti staff were interviewed twice over nine-month intervals, which allowed for a sense of change in the narrative data. "Roman interfaithers" and "Typical Romans" were contacted through "snowball sampling," a recruitment method that employs research into participants' social networks to access specific populations. Through snowball sampling, interviewees are recruited by word of mouth and as friends-of-friends. This method can generate a unique type of social knowledge—knowledge which is "emergent, political and interactional." Chaim Noy. "Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, no. 4 (2008): 327–44. However, some researchers caution that it can also constrain the research sample to a certain demographic or present difficulties in finding informants. Alistair Geddes, et al. "When the Snowball Fails to Roll and the Use of 'Horizontal' Networking in Qualitative Social Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* (2017): 1–12. Indeed, using participants' own social networks to recruit new participants, while effective at recruiting participants, risks an accumulation of unrepresentative confirming data, as people associate with others like themselves or who hold the same views, rather than contradictory data. This limitation is acknowledged here, although the presence of replicated confirmation bias also serves to support the central hypothesis that the interfaith society is more an act of solidarity between likeminded people than it is a persuasive social change mechanism.

encompasses a platonic ideal of pluralism and not a real demographic possibility. In the same vein, the Roman communities detailed here are not representative of interfaith communities and interfaith dialogues *in general*, but the theoretical conclusions of the study are grounded in data from this particular context. Nevertheless, the Rome context is representative of a certain type of interfaith community that brings together different religious communities with mostly shared identities in terms of race, class and political orientation.

Theoretical Framework

This article makes a case about the discursive foundations of interfaith engagement as a form of "ritual," drawing on a functionalist understanding of ritual from the sociology of religion, which is not specific to any particular religious tradition. This is in keeping with the article's Durkheimian framework and also touches on the work of anthropologist Roy Rappaport, who understood ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers."[3] The functionalist view of interfaith ritual action—or ritualized interfaith interactions, in the form of repetitive discourse that draws on commonly uttered but difficult-to-define idioms and constructs—carries a regulatory function which reinforces the social contract of shared meanings and intentions among a moral community. The power of interfaith discursive rituals, which will be "unpacked" in this article, rests on sacred postulates which cannot be quantified or disproven and thus maintain their power to inspire commitment and solidarity among the interfaithers.

Interfaith Dialogue as Religion in a Durkheimian Framework

The interfaith society is a diverse, modern moral community—a network of people drawn together by commonly-held moral claims such as the inherent goodness of religious pluralism. I came to understand that it is also a type of religious community, in the Durkheimian sense. It is well-described by a slight adjustment to French sociologist Émile Durkheim's definition of religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things… which unite into one single moral community called a Church."[4] This quotation requires only minimal revision to define interfaith engagement and its post-secular, multi-religious forms: the interfaith society is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred *values which unite a self-selecting group of members of multiple religions* into one single moral community." Durkheim argued that religion served to strengthen social bonds in the etymological sense of religion, *re-ligare*, repeated binding, the reinforcement of social ties. My research has shown that interfaith engagement does the same.

Durkheim wrote that religion is a social fact, so it must have a social basis. In fact, for Durkheim, religion is not merely "a" social fact, but it is *the* primal and originary social fact—an experience transcending the physically isolated, selfish ego which impels commitment to an eternal collective. As Durkheim saw in religion, the invocation of unifying beliefs and sacred values bonds

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[3] Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24.
[4] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: Free Press, 1912), 44. It is important to understand that Durkheim used the word Church to refer to the collective or communal aspect of religion, or what he called the moral community. In this article I occasionally use the word "church" in the same way, drawing on terms with a Christian origin or association, in deference to how Durkheim used them and how these words are still invoked in Western vernacular. Nevertheless, it is also important to "trouble" Durkheim's word usage which nowadays is considered archaic or colonialist, and to flag these words for their intended meaning in this work.

the community together. An executive officer of the Tavolo Interreligioso and Italian Buddhist Union expressed these mechanisms in strikingly religious language: "If you *believe* in religious pluralism, dialogue is easier. Each religion has positive values but different lifestyles: we can all speak of love and solidarity but we do it differently. You must have faith in the process." Interfaith dialogue is the "church" of values, where all can transcend the aesthetic details of religious and cultural difference and venerate their common axiological totem, thereby transcending their individual differences. The interfaith society "is the objective, universal, and eternal cause of those *sui generis* sensations of which religious experience is made." Dialogue evokes a moral force through its faith claims about the righteousness of pluralism, and "awakens that feeling of support, safety, and protective guidance which binds the man of faith to his cult. It is this reality that makes him rise above himself."[5]

At the Rome meeting of the International Council of Christians and Jews, a rabbi affirmed the Durkheimian view of religious community when he told me that most of his Reform congregation does not believe in God. "But they're not coming to synagogue for God," said the rabbi. "They're coming for each other, for the routine, for the structure of the familiar set apart from the daily grind." He has noticed in his congregation that "interfaith is the new religion for people on the edge of their religions. For people who are more comfortable talking to people on the outside." A Zen Buddhist monk active in the group Dialogo Interreligioso Monastico told me, "Dialogue is a little like a religion, it is seen as the only way, in fact it really *is* the only way to help the problems of humanity, for people come to a fuller experience of what they don't understand." And at the annual meeting of Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam, a scholar said, "An interfaith gathering quickly becomes a new religion, with its own form of communication, its own moral system."

With comments like this it became increasingly obvious that it is useful to view interfaith dialogue as a sort of "religion" in Durkheimian terms—with all its denominations, schisms, hierarchies, and a history that enables each member to be a part of something that is greater than the sum of its parts.[6] As in the Durkheimian definition of religion, interfaithing in Rome consists of a network of people practicing interfaith encounters, including religious leaders, laypeople, longtime members of religious communities and more recent converts. Given the setting in Rome, a strong Catholic presence is found at interfaith events, alongside far fewer but equally steadfast participants from Muslim, Protestant, Buddhist, and Progressive Jewish traditions.

These dialoguers all together constitute a community ritualistically united around their moral ideals, who set apart sacred values like unity and transformation from such profane forces as prejudice, violence and consumerism. Interfaithers talk frequently about dialogue's concrete social impact upon the world, but my research has shown that social transformation—from

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[5] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 420–21.

[6] "Collective representations are the product of an immense cooperation that extends not only through space but also through time; to make them, a multitude of different minds have associated, intermixed, and combined their ideas and feelings; long generations have accumulated their experience and knowledge. A very special intellectuality that is infinitely richer and more complex than that of the individual is distilled in them." Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 15.

changed minds, to increased civic cooperation, to prevention of interreligious conflict—are not actually the clearest indications by which to assess the "usefulness" of dialogue.[7]

This is because the foundation of interfaith dialogue is not its results, but rather its practices—not its product, but its process. These practices reinforce the interfaith society's collective, totemic *sacred values*. The repeated, collective invocation of these sacred values is, according to Durkheim, the practice that signifies to the members of the community that they belong together to the in-group collective, solidifying also awareness of who is *not* in their group.

Totemic Sacred Values of the Interfaith Society

The interfaith society of Rome has collective ways of talking about its values and goals—discursive practices—that tell an observer a lot about how interfaithers think about social diversity and what kind of social change they envision. In their conversations, they frequently articulate their *sacred values*, which are moral imperatives that are transcendental, inviolable, and ultimate. Their sacred values represent the best possible world, a sort of human paradise, one that the interfaithers feel tasked with constructing. The interfaithers, by talking about and enacting their sacred values through the canopy of dialogue methods, develop a common language that binds them together. That's right: by talking about unity, the interfaithers become unified.

The sacred values of interfaithers are, to name a few: unity across social divides; transformation of the profane world and its xenophobia and violence; humanization and common ground across social divides; mutual recognition of each other's worth and experience; and being helpful and useful in a turbulent world. They talk like this so often that the phrases start to seem platitudinous. But the sacred values of interfaithers are not just clichéd expressions. These phrases become potent symbols, "discursive objects" that hold a power greater than the sum of its constituent letters. The term "discursive object" hails from the field of discourse analysis, largely associated with French philosopher and social critic Michel Foucault, who discussed how power and knowledge were constructed in society.

As sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote in *The Social Construction of Reality*, "The most important vehicle of reality maintenance is conversation."[8] For Foucault—like for Berger and Luckmann—power and knowledge are reified through discourse, or conversation. Discourse is a primary vehicle for "reality maintenance"—as well as the construction of norms, values, and social hierarchies. Who has the power to assign meanings and uses to words, and how do they do it? Foucault analyzed "discursive objects," word units or phrases, that are collectively

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[7] The measurement of interfaith dialogue's "social return on investment" merits a separate analysis about the awkwardness of blending *quantitative* indicators of impact with the *qualitative* emphases of dialogue practice. There are ways to express the "results" of dialogue but doing so requires an explicit framework for defining impact and results. It should also be acknowledged that various interfaithers have various goals; while some are content with "mere" meaning-making and relationality, others are more devoted to "achieve results," and are more likely to have adopted a framework for defining what those results are and how they can be assessed, and to adjust their practices accordingly.

[8] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 172.

constructed to hold a power and meaning that become influential in a society.[9] Foucault might ask: how does a community construct the discursive object of "race relations?" Who uses the expression; what meanings does it carry; who does the language imply will dominate whom; what interracial norms and hierarchies become wrapped up in the discourse of race? In the process of discourse analysis, we quickly see that the meanings of language are fluid yet consequential, and that communities can objectify phrases into containers of complex meaning and power. Foucault was also interested in the relationship between discourse and practice: how a community moved from talk to action.

One of the major findings of this research is that, for interfaithers, talk and action is one and the same. The pronouncement of a discursive object *is* the centerpiece of interfaith action. So the interfaith appeal to a sacred value—which has been co-constructed across social divides and takes on more meaning and power the more it is formulated as common ground between them—constitutes interfaith practice.[10]

We can draw on the work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim to understand the power of sacred values by conceptualizing them as totems. Totems were identified by the earliest anthropologists in "primitive societies" which adopted the figure of an animal or other natural figure that would come to represent that group and stand as its emblem. That figure—a bear, an eagle, and so forth—is represented in tattoos, sculptures, flags, and physical objects that the community ritualistically "worships" by invoking it so commonly in their discourse.[11] The community gathers around the representation of that figure—around a totem pole, for instance—and through the practice of collective rituals such as chanting or dancing, they collectively elevate the divinity represented by the totem. In turn, the totem is understood to imbue the group with spiritual force, which is most perceptible when the group is in an altered and elevated state of heightened collective enthusiasm, or collective effervescence.[12]

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[9] Reiner Keller, "Analysing Discourse. An Approach From the Sociology of Knowledge," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 6, no. 3 (2005); *c.f.* Fairclough, Norman, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Addison, 1995).

[10] A discourse analysis of the power relations inherent in the Roman interfaith society would yield another fruitful discussion. There is a social hierarchy is at work among the interfaithers of Rome, whereby actors draw on the sacred totems of pluralism, humanization, mutual recognition (and so forth) in order to reify their power. Parsing the difference between the social hierarchies of the interfaith realm against those found in the public sphere of Rome, given the Roman Catholic influence, is a promising agenda for future inquiry.

[11] "Worship" is encased in quote marks here to both acknowledge, and set the term apart from, its Christian undertones. The term is chosen to demonstrate the inherently "religious" nature of the interfaith community and its ritualistic discourses, not to superimpose a Christian or monotheistic tone upon the argument herein. See Note 5 (above) regarding Durkheim's use of the word "church."

[12] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 236–45.
As above with the terms "church" and "worship," it is important to acknowledge again here that Durkheim's language and interpretive frameworks are obviously dated and do not exhibit sensitivity about the problematic nature of referring to "primitive" societies and their "aboriginal" practices of "totemism." Postcolonial researchers question these terms and concepts, and their use to interpret modern "religious" phenomena. Nevertheless, I find Durkheim's theoretical framework to be not merely applicable but quite illuminating to understand the moral force possessed by interfaith totems and sacred values, and the solidarity fostered through the ritualistic invocation of these totems in interfaith discourse. Thus, I continue to "think with" Durkheim's framework, despite his dated language, reflexively noting when these terms reflect antiquated, insufficiently critical social orientations.

Durkheim claimed that the totem carries no inherent power. Rather, it radiates with the power that the community projects upon it and is a representation of the community itself—a collective representation—and of the community's most sacred values. The totem is the symbolic manifestation of society in its own eyes. The emotional response to the totem is in fact an emotional response towards one's own community.

"God is society, writ large," wrote Durkheim. And "religious forces are human forces, moral forces." Collective representations are reinforced when expressed in their totemic forms—that is, through ritualized discourses on sacred values and methods of interfaith interaction. Thus "religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or re-create certain mental states of those groups."[13] When the society's totemic ideals are reinforced through conversation and practice, the selfsame society is reinforced in a classic Durkheimian formulation. "Worship" of the discursive totem of "unity," through various methods of interfaith engagement, are the solidifying rituals of the group that reify the sacred values and totems through a process of repetitive social construction. "Worship" of these totemic ideals and practices solidifies the community because these ideals are in fact representations of the community itself, and in embracing these totems they are embracing themselves.

Durkheim refers to this dynamic as the *totemic principle*: an object—either physical or discursive—which exerts a moral force over the group and unifies them. The power of the totemic principle is so forceful that it seems transcendent or godly.[14] The totem is constructed and enacted through discourse, dialogue that evokes deep satisfaction and sometimes even collective effervescence—group feeling—that "validates the sacredness of their venture."[15]

In this way, the interfaith society is fueled and guided by shared conversations about unity, transformation, mutual recognition and humanization. When these totems are summoned in interfaith practices, the group enters the type of "liminal" in-between space that Anthropologist Victor Turner famously analyzed.[16] Interfaithers imaginatively cross the threshold of social divide, temporarily dissolving social hierarchies and divisions. Liminality allows for new customs and identities to be established. In interfaith dialogue, the fluidity of this liminal space is made possible by a stable "container" or point of commonality which acts as an axis around which the group may assume a new social form.[17] For interfaithers, that axis is their set of shared sacred values.

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[13] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 9.

[14] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 218–19. "The totem expresses and symbolizes two different kinds of things. From one point of view it is the outward and visible form of what I have called the totemic principal or God; and from another, it is also the symbol of a particular society that is called the clan. It is the flag of the clan, the sign by which each clan as distinguished from the others, the visible mark of its distinctiveness, and the mark that is borne by everything that in anyway belongs to the clan: men, animals, and things. Thus, if the totem is the symbol of both the god in the society, is this not because the god and the society are one and the same? How could the emblem of the group have taken the form of that quasi-divinity if the group and the divinity were two distinct realities? That's because the god of the clan, the totemic principal, can be none other than the clan itself, but the clan transfigured and imagine in the physical form of the plant or animal [or idea] that serves as totem" (Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 208).

[15] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 424.

[16] Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

[17] This may even include a shift in the positions of participants who, often being religious leaders or highly involved members of their religious communities, may become less socially powerful in the liminal space of dialogue. The

Long before Foucault, Berger or Luckmann, Durkheim astutely noted the power of conversation to constitute and reinforce the sacred values of a group. It "notifies individuals that they are in unison and brings home to them their moral unity. It is by shouting the same cry, saying the same words, and performing the same action in regard to the same object that they arrive at and experience agreement."[18]

Discursive Interfaith Rituals

The discursive world of Rome's interfaith society is characterized by themes and words that run through it, but also by the very structure of the events where the talk takes place. At the Interconfessional Center for Peace (CIPAX), I attended a panel conference about nonviolent resistance. Each speaker on the panel delivered a statement—from testimonies of action or belief, to normative exhortations of the way the world ought to be. Audience members frequently nodded all together in agreement at the expression of shared values, at statements about unity, harmony, transformation, resilience, faith, peace and hope. *They look like they're listening to a sermon at church*, I wrote in my field notebook. And, like at church, the word that is being preached about peace helps them keep the faith in their collective practice.

At CIPAX, as at most interfaith events, there are many undeniable similarities to what a social scientist might see in a more identifiably religious setting such as a Protestant church service. As in a religious setting, there's a structure: a discussion panel has a series of "sermons," then there's a series of "testimonies" from audience members invoking unity and social change, then during "coffee hour" they break bread together, often with a "benediction" from the organizers. These meetings reinforce peoples' ideas, morals, hopes, investments or identity affiliations.

The words and phrases I heard in interviews and at interfaith events of every type and location form a lexicon that defines the interfaithers' social world and its boundaries. Interfaithers not only share a vocabulary of values (unity, transformation, hope, et. cetera) and hot topics (terrorism, immigration, integration, human rights, et cetera), but also employ catchphrases such as "being the change they wish to see in the world" or "leading by example" until there is a "critical mass" or "tipping point" that amounts to "the long arc of history bending toward justice." I heard from many that interfaith engagement is a way to "humanize" others, to explore the "complexity" of religious difference, to achieve "mutual recognition" and to challenge the "instrumentalization" of religion for destructive agendas.[19]

Through these phrases and words, across virtually all Roman interfaith contexts, I observed strikingly similar descriptions of the hoped-for crescendo of interfaith acceptance in the world.

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reward of this sort of power exchange is embedded in the interfaith "faith claim" of the righteousness of pluralism and presents the same kind of paradox found in Christian "servant leadership." The more a participant who is a leader atop a social hierarchy in a religiously homogenous context embodies interfaith sacred values, the more "equalized" they become with others in the platonic interfaith realm, signaling their virtue and moral power to other interfaith players—their closeness to the totem.

[18] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 232.

[19] A further discussion of the construct of "humanization" in interfaith circles can be found in Jenn Lindsay, "Interfaith Dialogue and Humanization of the Religious Other: Discourse and Action," in *International Journal of Interreligious and Intercultural Studies* 3 no. 2 (2020), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.32795/ijiis.vol3.iss2.2020.691.

These are the words interfaith activists use as they relate to each other the narrative of how interfaith engagement can change the world. Whether catchphrases or clichés, these soundbites circulate through every sector of the interfaith society, signaling membership in a group that prizes constructive transformation.

One soundbite, *una goccia nell'oceano* (a drop in the ocean) popped up in many of my interviews when I asked interfaithers about the broader impact of interfaithing. For example, the journalist and Confronti founder Emilio said, "We are a drop in the ocean, we don't have the key to solving all problems. We are aware of giving a little help, a contribution of goodwill and intelligence, but we know that it would be ridiculous to assume that you have the key to solving all." This phrase, *una goccia nell'oceano*, signals a modest collective acknowledgement of the limits of interfaith engagement, while affirming the mystery of its broader consequences. It simultaneously warns that seeking a clear and measurable product is fruitless. It is a phrase—and a way of understanding action—that marks the speaker as an insider to the interfaith world.

The Community of the Convinced

In Rome, the same cast of characters is involved across the many types of interfaith events. These gatherings are sponsored on the institutional level (at the Vatican), on the grassroots level (informal social gatherings self-funded and directed by dedicated small groups), and on the "third sector" nonprofit community association level, funded through grants, private donors, and sometimes municipal monies.

It makes sense that the same cast of characters rotates at different events: most of them are friends. The driving force behind the moral community of interfaith dialogue is *social force*. One participant said, "I'm going to dialogue because my friends are there." In fact, at the beginning of my research, the same dialoguer informed me that I would likely see the same participants at many different types of interfaith activities around Rome, at events hosted by many different groups. An old-timer peace and pluralism activist, this dialoguer has seen the same people at a variety of interfaith events since he first got involved in 1968, saying, "Dialogue events remain self-oriented and closed, but there is good and meaningful discussion. ...In Rome, dialogue is comprised of a well-defined group, of the same people doing the same thing. In some way they are like 'cows' falling into file with an idea that is collectively recognized as virtuous, as helpful. Dialogue tends to have the sympathy of all participants but no growth."

This consistent presence of this "cast of characters" across varied interfaith groups and contexts confirmed my sense that the interfaith society, though it expands across institutional, nonprofit and grassroots sectors and embraces all faiths, is chiefly a *cerchio dei convinti* (circle of the convinced), a moral community of people who are *already persuaded* of the worth of their assembly and collaboration. Though their circle is porous and welcomes all comers—with some interfaithers indeed agonizing that it is hard to bring newcomers in—mostly familiar faces compose the crowd at a large range of gatherings. An employee from interfaith magazine Confronti commented, "We try to build dialogue but unfortunately we build dialogue between people who are already open, that are already predisposed to dialogue. The difficult thing is to get people to talk who are not doing it. This is really hard."

Not only is the interfaith society of Rome populated by a rotating cast of characters, but they are collectively conscious of their community being a "circle of the convinced." This was a prominent and self-conscious theme in many of my interviews. It is strange even to interfaithers that a mission to bring into communion people of different beliefs should be "preaching to the converted" and suffer so much trouble attracting people of truly, deeply, irreconcilably different beliefs. Also beyond Rome, interfaith dialogue is often criticized for its insularity,[20] and many of my subjects took pains to address it. A volunteer of dialogue group Convivio said, "In dialogue, there are interested people, but they all have the same sensibilities. There are no racists, no people who really need the dialogue. It is a cycle of people who already appreciate the act of dialogue."

Some seemed motivated to try to change the situation, and some consider being "convinced" a basic requirement for presence. Others think the interfaith movement is slowly growing and that will lead to a "tipping point" or "critical mass" where more citizens are committed to dialogue and the culture starts to change. Still others are reconciled to the lack of ideological diversity in their pluralist gatherings, calling only for self-awareness.

Interfaithers, as we have noted, talk a lot about social impact and social change. Many say they think dialogue can impact the world. Surely, interfaithing bears a profound impact on the lives of interfaithers, and they have lots of stories about that (which I will discuss more in a later section of this article). But the impact is subtle, located in subjective narratives about relationships, attitudes and identities. There is another, more obvious effect that arises from interfaithing: *developing an identity as an interfaither.*

Over eighteen months of research, both in formal interviews and informal conversations, it became clear to me that joining the interfaith "circle of the convinced" entailed taking on a *distinct identity construction.* An employee at Confronti, for example, described that his experience working on issues he was truly passionate about and meeting other people who shared his positions created, in his terms, a "solidification of identity." He stated, "My life is oriented toward cultural relations and pluralism. My dialogue work caused these themes to be my identity and not a hobby. It's been something that has guided my life."

His experience of solidification—in personal identity and in social circle—was echoed frequently by other interfaithers. It became clear that interfaithing regularly leads one to develop a personal self-concept as an interfaither. The group members identify with each other and partake in a collective identity. Identity development, therefore, is a basic product of interfaithing.

Interfaith participation can be so personally significant that some go so far as to consider it a state of being: as a Catholic priest said to me at a Confronti interfaith discussion the day after the Paris November 2015 attacks, "We don't choose to do dialogue like you choose to put on a green scarf in the morning. It is just *who you are.* Those who have attained spiritual maturity do it because it's the right thing to do. It's a way to make sense of the world. And we're here today as a response to the Paris attacks."

That morning, those interfaithers were gathered not just because they could empirically demonstrate that their dialogue activity was an effective stimulator of social change; but rather

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[20] Anna Halafoff, *The Multifaith Movement: Global Risks and Cosmopolitan Solutions* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).

because they found comfort, purpose, and hope in gathering together in the embrace of their shared sacred values. They were gathered because, according to them, it was "the right thing to do."

The circle of the convinced is bound together by the forceful moral claim that dialogue is "the right thing to do." Some interfaithers told me they felt they didn't have a choice about whether to do dialogue: it is simply morally correct. "It is the appropriate moral response to the groaning pains of the diversifying world," said a Catholic priest in the offices of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Another Catholic priest who serves as the president of the Catholic Ecumenical Office said, "Those of us who do it don't have a choice. It's just the right thing to do. It's a *moda da vivere* [way of life]." Silvio from Sant'Egidio said, "Dialogue is part of the DNA of the community of Sant'Egidio. It is what puts people together. It is a given. There is no other way. It's very good to be sure of something in a world that tells you nothing is for sure." The moral rightness of dialogue was often expressed to me in terms of *faith*, as I heard at a conference on Religion and Violence at Roma Tre University: "Dialogue is a profound choice and duty of faith. We have a lot of faith in what we're doing and want to continue this practice and discipline." Francesco, a photographer for Confronti, sees his interfaith contributions "as a duty and a pleasure, for me it is natural. And it's a privilege, to know diversity, if you have the capacity. It is *pane quotidiano*." Edin, one of the presidents of Tavolo Interreligioso, said, "I have a responsibility, a mission to do dialogue, it is not a choice. …There's no PR or fame or wealth in this work. We're like the Blues Brothers, on a mission from God. We are called."

How do the members of the circle of the convinced become convinced? Many interfaithers advocate for dialogue because they themselves have had the experience of entering another culture and learning from it personally, allowing it to enrich their experience of their own religion and culture. Others were raised in progressive religious environments, like the Waldensian Church, which cultivates clergy and laypeople who visibly, energetically promote dialogue from within congregations. Catholics who were open to other religions to begin with are reinforced in their dialogic inclinations by the current Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, the most pro-dialogue pontiff in history. Many interfaithers were raised in family environments that fostered general cosmopolitan values and a global mindset. Some interfaithers embark upon dialogue in response to the abstract idea that, on a global scale, religious diversity has led to misunderstanding and violence. But since it's not easy to find clear examples of "interreligious violence" in Rome, these dialoguers respond to the broader specter of interreligious intolerance and conflict that presently haunts the Western world.

Discourse Amongst the Convinced

Because the interfaith groups of Rome tend to include the same people doing the same things, their actual transformative reach into their communities is debatable. The lack of substantive, measurable transformation is demonstrated not only by the lack of concrete goals and indicators of change—and blank stares or irritation when I requested them—but also by the consistent congregation of the same participants who have been attending for years. At the PISAI meeting one participant said, "All interfaith gatherings have the same people at them. It's like a religious congregation with members. The community is welcoming but stagnant. They just don't attract the people who really need to do it. It is transformative for participants but not for those disinclined to do interfaith work in the first place."

At first, I wondered if the "circle of the convinced" signaled a failure of the Roman interfaith dialogue movement to reach out and recruit non-dialoguers, to convince the unconvinced, or to broadly disseminate their sacred values. But the more I saw these groups come together and saw the bonds that were strengthened by their ongoing conversations and kaleidoscope of approaches to religious difference, the more it became obvious that the "success" and "impact" of Rome's interfaith society was not about increased group numbers or any other clear metric. The success of interfaith dialogue lies in the solidarity and meaning-making practices of its circle of convinced participants.

Eventually, it became a major finding of this research that the point of this "social change community" is not social change but rather *the community itself* and its meaningful, morally forceful—indeed, religious—relationship to the concept of "social change."[21] The discursive ideal of transformation—how interfaithers talk about change—seems most resonant as a dynamically motivating ideal than as an observable reality.

The Discourse of Sacred Values

I interviewed a prominent Italian imam who used the phrase "universal values" several times in his description of interfaith engagement. He said that interfaith engagement "doesn't reverse Western trends of working, eating, enjoying consumer trends—but it brings depth to everything we do, and it brings a consciousness of values." This imam felt that the *change* dialogue can bring to society is "a movement of universal values that are shaped and upheld by all communities in all regions, interreligious values connecting people to the sacred dimension of life, steering people to the richness available to us, and our need for it."

I asked the imam to define universal values. He said, "Universal values are the sacred values of any human that respects richness of knowledge, the principal of justice, and love as an essence of relation between humans. Without these we are lost. Without these we are not human. They're universal because they belong to the essence of every human being. The unity of God inspired creation and roots these values. If you ignore them, you ignore nature."

Of course, the goal to "bring a consciousness of values" is very abstract. As soon as such aims are particularized into concrete strategies and measurable items, the universality of "universal values" is lost. The more universalized and abstract is the expression of such aims as unity, transformation, humanization and mutual recognition, the more broadly applicable they become, and the more seemingly "achievable." These goals remain most morally forceful when they are invoked in broad and inclusive verbiage. Since interfaith discourse on unity, transformation and mutuality is constitutive of the interfaith society, the abstractness of its expression is a necessary quality.

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[21] Social change, or transformation, is objectified and "worshipped" as a unifying totem of the interfaith society, and its invocation serves to bring solidarity to the group. "Religious force is none other than the feeling that the collectivity inspires and its members, but projected outside the minds that experience them, and objectified." Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 230.

What are these sacred values, and what do they mean? Transformation, authenticity, unity, impact, humanization, mutual recognition, common ground, and many of the poetic buzzwords and catchphrases in the interfaith society are tricky enough to define, let alone actualize. Their resistance to definition is part of their nature as "ultimate sacred postulates."

The idea of an ultimate sacred postulate was developed by anthropologist Roy Rappaport. In *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Rappaport describes ritual as the primary adaptive mechanism of humanity, enabling societies to adjust to changing environmental and social conditions. Ritual "instantiates particular moral states and conditions; the relation of morality to behavior, and of acts and words to each other…[and] the way ritual acts and utterances permeate social life with their moral effects."[22] According to Rappaport, ritual is supposed to energize communities to trust and care for each other and for their environments. His assessment of ritual applies to the interfaith society and its discursive practice of dialogue.

Rappaport proposed "ultimate sacred postulates" as containers of the sacred: constructs like the Christian trinity, phrases like the Shema of Judaism or the Shahada of Islam—these tend to acquire sanctity over time. They cannot be proved or disproved because the claims they make have no empirical referents in the world of ordinary experience. Anthropologist Brian Malley[23] adds that such postulates not only serve as fundamental premises but are also a core around which the community can adapt, while still preserving its sense of identity.

But does interfaith dialogue work to make the world a better place? Isn't that the whole point of it? Some say that is the wrong question. Instead of asking for proof value of dialogue in quantitative terms, one has to think in qualitative terms. A value cannot be counted. It is not subject to measurement. Interfaith dialogue is the "right thing to do," morally right, not subject to inquiry, bound by sacred values. Sacred values are inviolable, ultimate, and transcendent. They cannot be questioned or explained. Sacred values are ultimate sacred postulates which represent the group's collective moral orientation and convey what the group sees as morally good, right, and worthy.[24]

Collective representations and sacred values, since they are ultimate sacred postulates, constitute unprovable faith claims about the potentials and achievements of interfaith engagement.[25] According to Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod,[26]

Sacred values differ from material or instrumental values in that they incorporate moral beliefs that drive action in ways dissociated from prospects for success." The practice of

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[22] E. Messer and M. Lambek, *Ecology and the Sacred: Engaging the Anthropology of Roy A. Rappaport*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 245.

[23] Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

[24] Therefore, interfaith engagement cannot be understood or justified by examining its "achievements." Indeed, a decent social scientist would not walk into a Methodist church and ask how many deceased congregants went to Heaven, then rate the value of the church accordingly. My fieldwork has taught me that interfaith engagement is best treated in a similar way.

[25] "An idea is said to be necessary when, due to some sort of internal property, it enjoys credence without the support of any proof. It does contain in itself something that compels the intellect and wins over intellectual adherence without prior examination" (Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 16).

[26] Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, "Reframing Sacred Values," *Negotiation Journal* 24, no. 3 (2008): 221–246. *c.f.* S. Atran and J. Ginges, "Religious and Sacred Imperatives in Human Conflict," *Science* 336, no. 6083 (2012): 855–57.

interfaith dialogue doesn't need to be justified or proven impactful because the values fueling it are moral facts (and, as Durkheim would specify, social facts). The moral and social force of interfaith dialogue and its ultimate sacred postulates are taken to be true without proof, serving "as a foundation of a discursive structure which includes more than itself.[27]

Sacred values reflect the central faith claims of the group that holds them. Faith claims are unprovable assertions that believers make about their commitments and practices. *Interfaith* faith claims invoke a sacred value that can be upheld across religious traditions without contradicting the traditions as understood by the interfaithers.

What is the Ideal Society?

I observed many more discursive tactics that were distinct to the interfaith society, and that served to bind the community together. The most prominent discourses of the interfaith society are about their *sacred values*, the totems that represent their highest ideals and which draw them together in common orientation.

Since transformation is one of the totems of Rome's interfaith society, much of their discursive practice centers on talk about the social change they desire. The ideal society of interfaithers is characterized by inter-group tolerance and collaboration, made possible by the proliferation of shared values of peace and unity. It reflects a moral framework whereby the Western democratic, cosmopolitan "civil society" promotes integration and religious freedom as key elements to functional multiculturalism.[28] Of course, the structures and applications of these concepts differ across Western countries—"religious freedom" means something different in its application in Britain, France, and in the USA. But, largely writ, the "social change" valued by interfaithers is the progression toward a morality of inclusion, and toward the ideal cosmopolitan civil society envisioned by European social philosophers of the Enlightenment era, or as Kwame Anthony Appiah describes, a community in which individuals from varying locations (physical, economic, etc.) enter relationships of mutual respect despite their differing beliefs (religious, political, etc.).[29]

Anna Halafoff articulates how both Kant's original idea of cosmopolitanism, and Ulrich Beck's more recent understanding of it, which he calls "ultramodern cosmopolitanism,"[30] have been embraced by interfaithers. Halafoff explains that Kant's cosmopolitanism is "founded on an awareness of a global community in which all have equal rights and should have a voice in determining their future, enabled by collaborative, deliberative, democratic processes. According to Kant's cosmopolitanism, all citizens are equal bearers of human rights and democratic legitimacy. …The need to develop greater understanding—of diverse faith, of the underlying causes of conflicts and of the nature of reality—is a central tenet of both the multifaith movement and ultramodern cosmopolitan theory. In addition, the nonviolent, dialogical methods employed

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[27] Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 287.

[28] In fact, the Western cosmopolitan civil society itself functions as a "meta-religion" in the words of James Laine in *Meta-Religion: Religion and Power in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

[29] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[30] Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 17.

by multifaith actors to enact social change, addressing risks at the causal level in partnership with state actors, align the multifaith movement with cosmopolitan principles."

If the interfaith society were to incorporate itself and develop a mission statement, it would probably look a lot like this passage from Halafoff. Interfaithers believe that their practices promote a global community in which all have equal rights, all have a voice in determining their future, and which is always in motion to rebalance power asymmetries, reconcile differences, and diffuse violence. This morality of inclusion is both embodied and constructed through the discourses of interfaithers in their gatherings.

The Totem of Transformation

Many interfaithers frame dialogue as a panacea for social religious conflict, terrorism, violence, and prejudice. Interfaithers who focus on the transformative potential of interfaith engagement want to make an impact on their society, and to reach and recruit those "unconvinced" of the benefits of interfaith engagement. Many interfaithers frequently—indeed, ritualistically—discuss the sacred value of transformation: it responds to the state of the world and uses interfaith engagement to attempt to *transform* it. Many times, I have heard interfaithers claim that interfaith engagement must accomplish something, must be productive, must make a difference. "Dialogue should change society, otherwise we should just stay home," said Silvio of Sant' Egidio. This faith claim is a commentary on human nature: it implies that people and society-at-large *can* change for the better. The Catholic priest heading the Catholic Ecumenical Office attended a Confronti meeting the morning after the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks and said, "When I am out of shape I feel bad, and I reflect that running is the right answer to that feeling. This morning we feel bad because of the attacks, and we say, what can we do in this awful world? And coming here is exactly what we have to do. It is our exercise for improving the fitness of the out-of-shape world." Interfaithers share a conviction that the "awful" and "out-of-shape" world can be improved *through dialogue*.

Those who operate off this claim continually seek ways to make a social impact, and tend to engage forms of dialogue more likely to make an impact, practicing mostly humanitarian methods of dialogue. They enter schools and hospitals to impart cultural education and religious literacy programs, do blood drives, form immigration relief curricula, and volunteer at soup kitchens. Some interfaithers talk a lot about social impact and transformation. Many others are less concerned about it. They are not as interested in demonstrating ambitious "impact," or creating a world-changing zeitgeist. They still acknowledge personal growth, but the change is on a level of subtle enrichment and meaning-making.

These "meaning-makers" are less concerned with whether their dialogue is "productive" or demonstrates results or social change, as this is not the objective of their engagement. They are more invested in the meaningful practice of building relationships, learning and praying together, helping each other in times of need. They focus on deepening relationships, following their curiosity, supporting each other, enjoying meals together, getting through another day, cultivating joy, articulating values, discussing books and films together. Their chief experience is to share an experience. *The product of their dialogue is the dialogue*.

Meaning-makers already knew what I had to spend eighteen months of fieldwork to discover: the products of dialogue are the experiences, relationships, values, and meaning cultivated in the interfaith. The lack of concrete proof-of-progress in the interfaith ambit does not disconfirm its significance and worth. A CIPAX volunteer confirmed this claim.

> The CIPAX public are usually old, friends of the founder. There is a preference among them of high-level discourse, and they all have affection for CIPAX and great friendship. Also, some are just interested in our themes. They have the personal need to do something, to contribute their presence, awareness—it's not much impact—but we have to involve people in their own way. For that person's life it's something. Not everyone can go directly to the heart of the cause or make drastic choices.

Interfaith meaning-makers do not refute the influence that interfaith practice bears on their own lives or upon society at large. Some of them, like the Focolare volunteer quoted below, believe that the significance of their movement can be demonstrated in longer-term historical change.

> The recent fiftieth anniversary celebration of Nostra Aetate with 500 people from around the world would've been impossible fifty years ago. So, something is happening. But the key change to be made is psychological, personal, interpersonal. This is microscopic and cannot be quantified. It is experiential, about values, subjective, and gradual. It is not rational. Thus, we cannot call on rational measures to gauge its presence. My friends often ask me how I know what I am doing makes a difference, if I can show it with numbers. I tell them, you can't. It can't be concretely demonstrated. It's the kind of thing you have to take a step back to see. If you're too close, you can't see it. We all want dialogue to be more than just meaningful for its participants, who are already committed. And on the wider historic scale something is happening. But the real work is grassroots. *Di base*, under the radar. Institutional activity is a symbol of the deeper change, but it cannot be represented in a way other than reflecting a broad social change, where is the real progress is and must be in individual lives and relationships.

Other meaning-makers critique the very notion that tools of measurement are relevant. Angelo, the president of local dialogue group Convivio, said, "I learned that, in order to heal and improve, the world needs non-linear humane processes, not just technological fixes."

Transformation brought about by interfaith dialogue is enshrined in "narratives of transformation." Much like testimonies of conversion in Evangelical Christian churches, some narratives are told over and over. Recognizing the importance of individual narratives of change, I asked interfaithers for an example of a time their lives had changed. I did not specify what kind of change. Those who spoke of changes brought about *from practicing dialogue* primarily described perspective and cognitive frame-shifts. They spoke of collecting knowledge and understanding, heightened awareness, new vision, disconfirmed stereotypes, seeing multiple perspectives, achieving comfort with complexity, seeing the other without projecting, noticing commonalities, and formation of a "dialoguer" identity. *No* dialogue-related transformation narratives I collected described changed actions, transformed lifeways or drastic reversals. Most changes revolved

around increased attendance at dialogues, and subtle adjustments of perspective and interpretation, or "thinking shifts."[31]

Many dialoguers acknowledge the likelihood of slow, gradual zeitgeist change as a result of dialogue and similar practices, but measurable efficacy is not their motive for participation. They seem more resigned to the limits of interfaithing. Aurelio of CIPAX said, "I'm not enthusiastic about interreligious dialogue. But I think it is necessary." Another meaning-maker, Angelo of Convivio, acknowledged the difficulty of assessing interfaith "success."

> The question of "what is success" is actually important in interfaith dialogue. Often interfaith organizations will fixate so much on "changing the world" that they define success as legislative change, or shifting social trends. They apply their idea of success to very concrete, material, external goals. But I think that interfaith engagement can be very transformative for the people involved, in very subtle ways--and that this is also an indicator of "success." Even groups who say they want to "change the world" are populated by people who are comforted by this sort of rhetoric, who are happy and confident in the company of similar activists for a better life. Finding these organizations and participating in a common goal becomes meaningful to them. So, I think a big part of "interfaith dialogue" is the experience and identity of the people who actually participate in it and find it to be meaningful. Even if it doesn't "work" in the ways they say they want it to.

Whether they are aiming for concrete change or reconciled to meaning-making, the discourse and practices of interfaithers resoundingly demonstrate that interfaithing is a ritualized social practice that binds together group members. The practice of interacting with sacred ideals of transformation and unity solidifies a collective identity as "people who care" and "people who are changing the world." Moreover, the discourses of transformation provide a space for grounding a collective identity as interfaithers. Durkheim wrote, "Anyone who has truly practiced their religion knows very well that it is the cult that stimulates the feelings of joy, inner peace, serenity, and enthusiasm that, for the faithful, stands as experimental proof of their beliefs. The cult is not

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[31] When the changes described occurred *beyond the dedicated sphere of interfaithing*, they were surprisingly more behavioral—more active and interactive. These personal transformations centered around parenthood, supporting others in hard times, religious conversions, new jobs, surviving crises, and self-realizations that led to new careers, geographical shifts, or drastic adjustments of social behaviors. In summary, dialogue-grounded changes were narrated as internal, experiential, hermeneutical shifts—and narratives of transformation *not* related to interfaithing were more active and behavioral. Of course, human life cannot be sorted into clearly delineated realms of thought and action, and an interfaith encounter may stoke the fire for a behavioral change in another field of action; but inasmuch as the dialoguers' "narratives of transformation" suggested, there was a broad pattern of dialogue leading to thinking shifts rather than action shifts. An instrumental attempt to verify the impact of interfaith dialogue, longitudinally applied with clearly-defined indicators for transformation, might find some trackable change, but in the attempt to define change it would overstabilize the messy phenomenon of dialogue so much as to reveal information only about a certain construct of dialogue. This would be useful, but not generalizable, information. Future research could create a study group, have them practice a consistent type of dialogue, and then periodically administer a psychometric measure of relational growth. Other efforts have similarly attempted to recreate the conditions of dialogue in experimental settings. The result is presumably "hard data" on what interfaith dialogue actually does. But the results of my study indicate that such a research design might stabilize and formalize the variables of method, practice, and sample group such that the process no longer looks much like the interfaith society of Rome.

merely a system of signs by which the faith is outwardly expressed; it is the sum total of means by which that faith is created and re-created periodically."[32]

Durkheim wrote that sacred practices and objects are valued by the community of believers not as means to ends, but because the community has bestowed their meaning on them as part of its worship. Interfaithers dream of transforming the profane world—which is diverse, tribalistic, violent, full of stereotypes and dehumanization—into a sphere that reflects the values of the sacred interfaith sphere. This sphere is itself a collective self-representation that solidifies interfaithers' bonds as co-dreamers. Because we have seen that meaningful discursive interfaith practices are by design resistant to measurement, the claim that it changes the world at large is mostly a statement of faith, hope and belonging. "Transformation" is not the point of this moral community—*because the moral community is the point.*

The dynamic invocation of the sacred value of transformation supplies a crucial momentum and energy. But it is above all a statement of faith and a collective practice of meaning-making. Any empirical expression of the value or impact of such a gathering would be moot to the gatherers themselves. While perhaps interesting for an outside party—an investor or a researcher obsessed with how interfaith dialogue matters—a demonstration of social "impact" would miss the fact that interfaithers are the fire keepers of Durkheim's aboriginal world: they light the flame of their discursive totem, and it is the vitality of their collective effervescence that draws the whole society of believers into the dance.

Because transformation or social change is a sacred value among interfaithers, it is repeatedly invoked in ways that generate solidarity within the group. That is, for interfaithers, *conversations about transformation are constitutive of the community.* These conversations are so potent that they can approximate, simulate or even replace the importance of empirically-demonstrated social transformation. "Transformation" is a discursive ideal that connects interfaithers to their hope and sense of solidarity. It makes life meaningful in the face of the profane frustrations of everyday life in Rome, as well as deeper existential threats in the world at large. When interfaithers celebrate "transformation," they celebrate the potential of their own undertakings, and in doing so, sustain their activities.

Conclusion

The interfaith society is a moral community that bonds over shared values and the construction of meaningful relationships. They deepen friendships and personal outlooks through learning, humanitarian and artistic collaboration, discussion, spiritual practice, and accompanying each other through difficult or significant moments. To better understand interfaith engagement, it is not enough to seek the formula for social transformation; one must instead look at all of the stories, interconnections, and experiences that populate the journey. Ultimately, one understands that the point of this "social change" community is not social change—the point is the community, itself.

Rather than a change agent, interfaith dialogue is actually an emergent form of multi-religious moral community, an enactment of European cosmopolitanism which attracts mostly people who already agree with each other about the value of pluralism. It is easy to mistake

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[32] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 420.

interfaith dialogue as heralding a new worldwide zeitgeist—partly because interfaith dialoguers themselves describe dialogue in that image. In reality, it is a group of moral communities who are discoursing together about the globalized, diversified world, idealizing its improvement and lauding the culture of cosmopolitanism that they themselves have already embraced. We have seen that, generally, people do not participate in dialogue unless they are already convinced of its aim—in the words of interfaithers themselves, people who are in the *circle of the convinced*—and that dialogue groups do not reach persuasively into realms of people who disagree with them.

It is increasingly common for outsiders to interfaith dialogue to evaluate it in terms of its social "return on investment," asking for concrete indicators of social impact. But after intensive ethnographic study I have found that it is only possible to understand interfaith engagement on its own terms, and to reflect on how interfaith engagement reifies a collective representation of pluralism in an increasingly diverse world, showing participants what is possible and enabling them to participate in building a world they dream of. The dreamed-of world may indeed only be constituted by the discourses and relationships of the "circle of the convinced," and the worlds beyond interfaith engagement may not reflect its sacred values. But participants seem more focused on enriching the world they have constructed together rather than expanding its scope. The interfaith society they have constructed together is robust, self-reinforcing, and convinced of its moral rightness.

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