**Faitheism: Fostering Interfaith Conversations That Include Atheists and Agnostics**

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**Overview of Session & Learning Objectives**

* Book discussion: *Faitheist* by Chris Stedman, 20 minutes
* Value of interfaith conversations that include atheists and agnostics, 15 minutes
* Participant discussion, 20 minutes
* Attendees of this session will:
	+ Be introduced to the book *Faitheist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious* by Chris Stedman, Assistant Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University and former employee of the Interfaith Youth Core.
	+ Explore the value of helping students of different religious and non-religious perspectives learn to discuss those perspectives with those who are different from themselves.
	+ Share examples and generate new ideas for fostering interfaith conversations that include atheists and agnostics.

**Tavris & Aronson, 2007, p. 228**

“All of us have hard decisions to make at times in our lives; not all of them will be right, and not all of them will be wise. Some are complicated, with consequences we could never have foreseen. If we can resist the temptation to justify our actions in a rigid, overconfident way, we can leave the door open to empathy and an appreciation of life’s complexity including the possibility that what was right for us might not have been right for others.”

* + **Excerpt taken *from Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts***

**Book discussion: *Faitheist* by Chris Stedman**

**Excerpt:** Stedman, C. D. (2010). Toxic atheism drives people apart. <http://www.salon.com/2012/10/21/toxic_atheism_drives_people_apart/>

**Book:** Stedman, C. D. (2012). *Faitheist: How an atheist found common ground with the religious*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

**Stedman’s Major Claims**

* All folks deserve equal dignity
* The new atheism is toxic, misguided and wasteful (mudslinging) militant, uncompromising *anti-theism*
* Atheists should engage religious diversity respectfully

**A (Shared?)Vision for A Better World**

* What future will we imagine for ourselves and our world?
	+ Not just, “Who am I?” but “Who can we be together?” (p 161)
* (Stedman) wants to create a world where people are free to be proud of who they are – HOW? (Building Bridges and Telling Stories)
* Interfaith engagement
	+ As the key to resolving the world’s great (religious) problems
	+ Working (together) to resolve the problems that afflict our world
* Cultivating mutually inspiring and trusting relationships that break down intolerance and improve the world
	+ Initiated by seeking to understand differences
	+ Challenging orthodoxy and fundamentalism(esp. the “New Atheist” movement)
		- “Sure handed certainty and dismissal”

**Deconstructing Us versus Them**

* Growing chasm between believers and atheists
	+ Two communities often pitted against one another
* The necessity of building Bridges
	+ Of respect and cooperation
	+ Can we learn to seek out our commonalities instead of solely fixating on our differences? (pp 5-6)
	+ The idea that it is worthwhile to make an intentional effort to find common ground is the difference between mere diversity and engaged pluralism
	+ Meeting and getting to know people – forced me to deconstruct my stereotypes (p 9)
	+ I was treating religion as a concept instead of talking to people who lived religious lives- systems of belief are dynamic

**The Power of Story**

* Engage with people and their stories (their experiences)
* Listen better(instead of lecture)! And then act on shared values
	+ Widens our distorted and narrow thinking
* Tell your story because it matters – we all have important stories to tell (p 10)
	+ Personal stories grounded in personal experience
* *I study religion because lots of people are religious, and there are a lot of religions, and everyone practices them differently. I think it’s important* ***to know what other people believe, and how that affects the kinds of decisions they make*** *(p 127)*

**Real, Honest, and Risky Engagement**

* There is a process of deconstruction involved in interfaith work- we must be willing to grapple with our fears and with the unknown, and uncover the hearts of diverse human experiences 11 .
* Dialogue isn’t meaningless – the humanization of the “other” elicited by an act of intentional encounter with difference leads to real change
	+ Challenging the beliefs we have about those who seem different and undergoing personal change is no easy task

**Stedman Models Vulnerability**

* “I was humbled into understanding how my conflicted enmity toward religion was poisoning my own well” (p 105)
* “It was clear that I needed to change my attitude toward religious people. It was holding me back in my relationships, in my work, and in my personal development- and it ran counter to the ethic of connection and service I’d cultivated all of my life. It was incomplete and inadequate- defined by caricature and critique instead of humility, honesty, and open-mindedness.” (p 115)
* My desire for certainty came at the expense of others’ humanity (p 159)
* “The walls I built didn’t really protect me, though; instead, they inhibited me from seeing others as full human beings, and they prevented others from knowing me and challenging their assumptions” (p 160)
* I looked for the negative to confirm my preexisting biases, instead of supporting and advocating for positive change or making sense of my own desires and values
* I learned… to see people as individuals instead of members of categories I didn’t belong to. (p 160)

**Stedman’s Exhortations**

* Don’t check real opinions at the door
* We must find solidarity wherever we can – and act upon it
* A bit of intellectual humility and self-awareness goes a long way
* See one another as people first
* Bring your full self to the table
* Common Action for the Common Good, Grounded in our own identity
* See the good in those who seem different
* A certain level of vulnerability and humility
	+ To be understood we must seek to understand
* Accomplish things that require a coalition larger than the community to which you belong
* Invested relationships across lines of identity difference are essential for avoiding conflict
* Individuals must meet and learn from one another
* Acknowledge truth, prioritize kindness with one another
* A willingness to learn from people, even if we think some of their beliefs are incorrect
	+ Religious pluralism is neither coexistence nor consensus

**Last Words**

* We can be dogmatically fixated on who is “right” and who is “wrong,” or we can discern a way to live together in tension and ambiguity
* What our world needs
	+ People of different stripes and convictions coming together to deal with things that matter, announcing our differences without fear, enthusiastically embracing our commonalities, and intentionally seeking out points of mutuality and understanding in the face of vastly different metaphysical commitments (p 133)

**Why Foster Interfaith Conversations That Include Atheists and Agnostics?**

**Demographics (Kosmin & Keysar, 2013)**

* College-age Americans are divided among not two but three distinct worldviews: Religious, Secular, and Spiritual.
* Patterns of belief in God are remarkably different in the three worldviews:
	+ The Religious group mirrors the general American adult population with 70% firm believers and only 2% saying they don’t believe in God or don’t know where there is a God and don’t believe there is any way to find out.
	+ At the other spectrum are Secular students, of whom 77% either don’t believe in God or don’t know if there is a God.
	+ Spiritual students exhibit an array of preferences: 27% believe in a higher power (but not in a personal God); 24% are firm believers; 21% believe in God (while having doubts); 12% don’t know if God exists and only 5% don’t believe in God.

**Privilege vs. Inclusion in Student Affairs**



**Polarization 🡨Atheism Religion 🡪**

Increasing acceptance of religious diversity does not extend to the nonreligious.

Atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups.

(Edgell, Gerteis, Hartmann, 2006)

**Teaching Tolerance**

 Tolerance: fair, objective, and permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, nationality, etc., differ from one's own; freedom from bigotry.

Americans have become increasingly likely to work with, live alongside, and marry people of other religions – or people with no religion at all. In doing so, they have come to accept people with a religious background different from theirs. It is difficult to demonize religion, or lack of religion, of people you know, and, especially, those you love. (Putnam & Campbell, 2010)

**Creating a New Social Norm**

We set a grand goal for ourselves at IFYC: to make religious pluralism a social norm within the course of a generation. Just as environmentalism, volunteerism, and multiculturalism had permeated our society, altering the notion of what it means to be a good citizen, shifting the images we see in magazines and movies, changing patterns in schools and workplaces, so would the idea that people from different religious backgrounds should come together in ways that built respect, relationships, and common actions. (Patel, 2012)

* + Eboo Patel is the founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core (www.ifyc.org).

**Audience Discussion Questions**

1. Reactions to book and ideas discussed?
2. What does interfaith cooperation mean for your worldview as a religious, spiritual, or secular person?
	1. What does it mean for you to be an advocate for interfaith cooperation?
3. What can we do to ensure interfaith dialogue that includes non-theists is done in a way that is authentic and real vs. politically correct, stilted, and disingenuous?
4. Have you participated in interfaith work or organized it?
	1. Has it included atheist/agnostic/secular participants?
	2. How did the experiences work out?
	3. What did participants gain from the experience?
5. Brainstorming: why, how, when, and where to create interfaith conversations that include atheists and agnostics?