

Title: Noah Silverman and Katie Baxter, Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC)

Episode: 47

Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy

Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Thanks for tuning in. I'm joined today by Noah Silverman and Katie Baxter from Interfaith Youth Core or IFYC. Noah is their Senior Director of Learning and Partnerships and Katie is their Vice President of Program Strategy. IFYC was founded by Eboo Patel and its mission is to create a system of people in campuses where interfaith cooperation is the norm.

The organization continues the tradition of modern interfaith work which started in 1893 with the Parliament of World's Religions. However IFYC is less focused on theoretical dialogue and more focused on action. They provide free educator resources on their website and they provide grant funding for scholars to create or revise undergraduate courses that integrate interfaith teams.

So I would like to talk a bit about your work in concrete terms. I know your general mission is to promote interfaith dialogue and interfaith cooperation and understanding. Can you give me some examples of what that looks like on the ground and American campuses today?

Katie Baxter: Sure. I will start and I have a couple and Noah might have a couple as well. We think a lot about what – examples of the problem that we're trying to have college and universities solve. So you might think about how religious identity emerges across a campus ecosystem at the administrative level, in the classroom with students. So IFYC for example, we help college administrators think about questions like, "What are senior administrators at a church-related college to do when their historical Christian religious affiliation might come into some tension with a group of students who want to organize and be recognized as a secular and atheist student organization? What's the mission question at work there when those two sets of beliefs and values might come into tension with one another?"

Chris Martin: Probably happens quite frequently, doesn't it?

Katie Baxter: It does. I mean questions of student group recognition and how students can organize and what is within and outside of policies at certain colleges and universities are pretty common. So there's the example of Christian campuses recognizing or not recognizing atheist and agnostic students formally. There are examples on the other side of course about what administrators at a public university might do or how they might think about recognizing Christian or Muslim or other religious student organizations with more orthodox faith claims when those religious student organization, policies about who can be in leadership, might come into tension with the college's inclusion or anti-bias policies for example.

So we see a lot of back and forth between administrative processes and the values and missional orientation of the university in intention sometimes with the religious claims that student groups are bringing.

Noah Silverman: Yeah, and I would say even beyond the policy questions around recognizing student groups, I mean if you look at American higher education, over half the institutions were founded with some sort of religious affiliation and for many of those institutions – for some of those institutions, that affiliation remains very strong and determinative and for some of them it’s more historical. But then you run into these questions.

If we’re a Catholic institution in the suburbs of Chicago and suddenly we wake up one morning and realize that our student body is 33 percent Muslim, what does it mean to be a Catholic institution that at this point is catering to a significantly immigrant South Asian, Muslim and Hindu population? What does it mean to be a Lutheran-affiliated institution when not only do we have secular students who are wanting to officially organize in the policy implications of that, but what does it mean for our broader missional identity in the world when our student body no longer identifies as Lutheran? We have a significant Catholic population or agnostic population or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or just some other brand of Protestant Christianity.

So that’s a lot of the work that we – a lot of institutions that we work with are sort of wrestling with those questions and we see interfaith cooperation, the sort of – the methodology that we put forward as a helpful way of bridging both sides of that. How do you maintain your historical identity as well as create a truly welcoming environment from people from different religious backgrounds and then furthermore foster opportunities for engagement across those identities on your college campus?

Chris Martin: So what are some other examples of cases you’ve had to deal with recently?

Noah Silverman: We have the great privilege of partnering with the Council of Independent Colleges to run a faculty seminar every year. So we get 25 to 50 faculty from institutions across the country to think about what it means to bring some of these questions around religious identity and diversity into the classroom and the exercise we have all the faculty do is prepare a case study of how this came up in their existing teaching experience and the stories that we hear from that are just amazing.

One of my favorite ones is there was a professor who trained a New Testament scholarship. But like many religious studies scholars or theology scholars, they’re sort of asked to teach a broad survey of classes including courses on Islam especially in the wake of September 11. So she found herself teaching this class on Islam and it’s the typical – she’s only a month or two ahead of her students in the reading and she gives this whole lecture on the differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam and she has gotten this from the little bit of research she has been able to do and then all of the students in class turn to the one international student who’s from Senegal in the class and they say, “Well, so Mohammad, are you Sunni or Shiite?” and he says, “I’ve never heard those terms before in my life.”

I think it just illustrates the way that some of our textbook knowledge and textbook understanding of how world religions or religious traditions work on paper and/or textbook actually is not totally in sync with the way real human beings live out their traditions in everyday life and increasingly on our college campuses here in North America. So it's one thing to know the historical distinctions between Sunni and Shiite Islam. It's a totally different thing to know how do I make my international students from Senegal feel welcome on this campus.

Katie Baxter: But we also hear from a lot of students and campus educators about how they balance and welcome different dimensions of identities. So at IFYC, we of course think about religious identity. But students are bringing a whole range of identities to campuses. So we're often in conversation with administrators and educators who are thinking about questions like they're really eager to respond to their request of Muslim students on campus who have request women-only swim hours in the campus swimming pool and they want to be able to make that accommodation and they move forward with that and then are a little bit surprised or unsure how to react when the queer students on campus raise the question of transgender – are transgender women included in those women-only swim hours or are they discluded from that?

I mean a variety of perspectives on how you might think about something as simple as the university swimming pool and I think one of the issues that's most common is one that I've already mentioned about when faith values particularly with Christian student organizations is saying – they're looking for particular faith claims and choices that the students in their leadership positions are making and those Christian organizations might say, you know, we – the leaders of our student organization need to represent Christianity in the way that it's described in our constitution and our commitments and that includes a biblical version of marriage between a man and a woman and that comes into tension with the campuses who are also trying to respond to the identity of LGBT students on campus.

So these are the kinds of stories we hear about a lot and are encouraging campus educators and students themselves to navigate carefully and avoid the trap of prioritizing or prefacing certain identities over others.

Chris Martin: When it comes to the swimming pool case, is that a type of case you often find or is that just in one or two universities? How does it usually get resolved?

Noah Silverman: I mean that specific story comes from a particular institution. But I think the broader issue – I mean as anyone who has worked in any kind of diversity work anywhere, but particularly in higher education, is familiar. Diversity issues are really tough. I think when you're particularly dealing with religious diversity, sometimes the stakes get raised because of the sort of the ultimate concern that could be associated with religion, the sort of theological and ultimate concern stakes that are involved.

So we joke around here that diversity is not just the differences that you like. I think there has been – since the '90s, there has been this general sense that we want to promote diversity, we want to promote diversity and increasingly we're finding that sometimes the more diversity that you have, actually the more problems that you're going to encounter between different identity

groups who have different notions of what does it mean to be a human. What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to do justice work?

One group's notion of justice is protecting the life of unborn fetuses and another group's notion of justice is actually protecting women's right to choose. How do you resolve those kinds of issues? So we're seeing – as I'm sure the listeners of this podcast know, these types of issues come up more and more frequently.

Chris Martin: Yeah, and the social psychology literature. There are at least a couple of articles called “the double-edged sword of diversity” because they talk about both positive and negative mediators between diversity and outcomes. So things get triggered. Things that get triggered by diversity can include both positive and negative things and some of the negative aspects are people dividing along fault lines.

Noah Silverman: Yeah. One of the scholars whose work has been deeply instrumental to us at IFYC is Diana Eck who founded the Pluralism Project at Harvard University some two decades ago and one of the distinctions that she makes in her scholarship is between diversity which she uses as a purely descriptive term. Diversity is the existence of people from different identity backgrounds cohabiting the same space. But actually tells your very little about what that interaction is like. It could be very positive or it could be very negative. So, you know, she points out that Iraq is a very diverse society and all the different identity groups are literally at each other's throats.

She contrasts that with pluralism which is the sort of productive and proactive engagement across lines of differences, not necessarily toward agreement, not toward us all coming to shared understandings of the way society ought to be or of our own understanding of our relation in the world, but rather a sort of respectful engagement of those differences and building relationships across them nonetheless.

Chris Martin: Now a lot of colleges have identity politics movements. They often don't use that explicit label. But I think people generally know what that term means. How do those movements intersect with what you're doing?

Noah Silverman: Yeah.

Katie Baxter: Good question.

Noah Silverman: That's a great question. I mean again listeners of this podcast are well aware that we live in a very challenging time around identity issues and in the broader society and it's showing up with increasing frequency and increasing tension on college campuses.

I think identity politics is sort of a loaded term these days. I think there are aspects of that broad category that have been incredibly useful. The realization that people's identities and experiences lead to different understandings of the world and ways in which systems of organization, whether it's higher ed itself or the broader society, disproportionately affect different groups. The deeper understanding we have for that all to the good.

Our goal though is really in trying to figure out ways for people across different identity backgrounds and particularly religious identity backgrounds to engage with each other positively and constructively and to appreciate more about each other's backgrounds.

So I think this is somewhat reductionist. But I think broadly speaking, diversity work in higher ed sort of takes two different strains. There's the strain that is about protecting and supporting historically or systemically marginalized communities, which is incredibly important work that we support and then there's the form of diversity work that's about building relationships and understanding across different identity barriers and the majority of our work is really in that latter category of how do we figure out how to build relationships and understand where other groups are coming from, even if we don't entirely agree and don't ultimately accept the precepts that form those other identity groups.

Chris Martin: Would you like to add anything, Katie?

Katie Baxter: To affirm that the work is – it's relational work and so what IFYC I think is striving to achieve is we're looking for certain kinds of behavioral outcomes that are exhibited we think most evidently in – when we're able to hold true deep relationships across true difference. Often especially as we work with young people on college campuses, those relationships are formed through exploring a commitment to the common good. So it might be through developing shared action or identifying shared values, being able to identify what we do have in common across these deep differences that allows us to hold those relationships together and then continue to discuss and to continue to have differences on some issues of real fundamental concern at the same time.

Chris Martin: On about how many campuses are you active at the moment? Can you talk a bit about how you measure your success in terms of building these – building positive relations?

Katie Baxter: Sure. IFYC is active on 500 or 600 campuses across the United States and we work across American higher education as we've talked about and we work at all levels of an institution. So we help college administrators develop interfaith strategic plans to name here's what's important and here's how interfaith cooperation is core to the mission and vision of our institution no matter our philosophy, our religious orientation.

We work with faculty members to develop courses and academic programs in interfaith studies and to adapt existing courses to add interfaith modules and interfaith focus and we of course work directly with students and their advisers on fostering and sustaining interfaith student organizations and interfaith student action on campuses. So we're really looking for those activities to be happening across the campus environment, across the campus ecosystem and we think – our research shows that setting up those environment – or I should actually say there's emerging research that we're starting to look at. But we're really looking to see the existence of those types of programs as spaces to foster those – the relationships that we're looking for.

Noah Silverman: Yeah. I think the question of assessment is also really interesting. So part of our assessment is based on this idea that we have of what we call the “interfaith triangle” which

is basically the notions of appreciative attitudes across religious lines. Relationships and knowledge are all mutually reinforcing and this has been shown time and time again in various social studies.

So the more I know about a different religious tradition, the more likely I am to have positive relationships with people from that tradition, the more likely I am to have appreciative attitudes towards it and it's set around the triangle.

So all of our programs in some way are sort of based on facilitating students or faculty or other members of campus communities sort of working their way around those triangles, developing greater knowledge of diverse religious traditions, developing relationships across lines of religious difference and developing greater appreciative attitudes towards religious diversity.

We've been fortunate enough that we've been able to participate – now I think we're in year four of a five-year longitudinal study that's actually trying to measure how we see that happening across the collegiate experience. So it's a longitudinal study. So there's administration of incoming first year students. I might be getting my years wrong. Three or four years ago. Then they were assessed again at the end of their first year and then at the end of this academic year, they will be assessed again as they're graduating to really see what difference does the college experience make facilitating those types of attitudinal changes and behavioral changes that Katie was mentioning earlier.

So we hope maybe in the next year or so to actually have some concrete hard data on what difference college can make in affecting some of these outcomes.

Chris Martin: And is there any kind of control group in that study where you're looking at a college parallel to that that's not participating in these programs?

Katie Baxter: The researching design includes college campuses that have lots of interfaith activity, college campuses that have some but maybe not holistic interfaith activity and some college campuses that at least as far as we can tell have little to no interfaith activity or at least little to no interaction with IFYC and the type of programs we offer and track.

So we are eager to see if there's a difference. So far, again in the first year of college, we are seeing that campuses that have deep and wide interfaith activity are – there are noticeable differences along the outcomes of the interfaith triangle that Noah mentioned, the relationships and the knowledge and the attitudes.

So preliminary signs are good and we will see what the data says after the full study in another year.

Chris Martin: Right. I know you can't promote specific universities. But can you talk a little about which universities have the largest interfaith programs at the moment?

Noah Silverman: Yeah. So Katie and I and IFYC's founder and president Eboo Patel wrote an article now a few a years ago in which we sort of identified what we called leadership practices

for interfaith excellence or what an imagined theoretical institution that did everything right, what it might look like. But for each of the nine leadership practices, we sort of highlighted one institution that we thought was doing that one practice supremely well.

So some of the institutions we lifted up for that would be – so I will talk a little bit about Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania which created the first major in interfaith leadership studies in the country as far as we're aware. So they really took this call to engage this work academically very seriously and built out a full – both major and minor program of study for undergraduate students who are interested not just in the questions of religious knowledge that you might find in a more typical religious studies program. But really how do I engage people from across these lines of difference in productive community and collaborative service work?

So we're really proud of the work that – the role that we played in helping Elizabethtown get that major off the ground and excited to see many campuses following their wake as well.

Katie Baxter: And I will mention Dominican University is a Catholic university here in the suburbs of Chicago near where IFYC is located and several years ago after some – a pretty holistic assessment and reflection on what was happening across Dominican campuses with regard to interfaith cooperation, they integrated core texts in their first and second years seminars that are required. All students take these seminars as Liberal Arts and Sciences seminars. They incorporated interfaith-related core texts.

So all of their first year students and all of their sophomores read – in this case, Diana Eck – and get something of an interfaith perspective and some basic literacy and knowledge of religious pluralism as part of their core curriculum.

Noah Silverman: It's also worth noting that many of the countries of most elite institutions have been doing some form of this work for decades. I mean even long before IFYC came on the scene, institutions like Brown and Harvard and Stanford have had multi-faith and interfaith chaplaincies truly for decades and have been thinking about ways to foster greater interfaith cooperation across their various religious groups.

What's interesting about what has happened in the past 10 or 15 years or so is the way that that has really diversified across the sector of higher education to what had been for a long time for the smaller church-affiliated independent colleges that didn't have as much religious diversity present but that are now sort of stepping – who are both now experiencing greater religious diversity and stepping up to the challenge and the opportunity that that presents.

Chris Martin: I have a couple of questions about attitudes towards the content of religions themselves. The first is regarding atheism. The number of atheists may not actually respect the content of religions even though they may have a great deal of respect for fellow human beings regardless of what religion they belong to. How do you deal with that sort of tension?

Katie Baxter: Yeah. I mean I think this is where it's notable that we're looking for certain behaviors. We're particularly looking for relationships as opposed to an intellectual agreement. So we do believe that we can differ in our understanding of fundamental concerns and we can

differ in how we even think about whether – we certainly want young people to be identifying shared values and we know that there are going to be non-shared values as well and it's – we encourage discussion of those deep differences. But that in the end, we're looking for folks to be able to preserve those relationships and say, you know, the reality is we live here together.

So IFYC's mission is actually a societal mission. We believe that America is a diverse democracy that has the potential to engage religion positively and we work with college campuses because we believe it's the best kind of laboratory or training ground to help future leaders learn how to do that.

So we want people, young people to be practicing how do I stay in relationship. How can we be in this community together even when there are some things that this person sitting next to me in class believes that I might find pretty vile or abhorrent in terms of what they think about life and death and Noah mentioned questions of justice earlier? That these aren't simple matters. We're not talking about favorite foods or favorite colors or how somebody dresses. But we're talking about kind of origins of the universe and how folks view life and death and those are significant matters and we think that we can coexist really positively in spite of and even often because of those differences.

Noah Silverman: Just building off of that, I mean it's worth noting that IFYC's vision is a civic pluralism. It's a project of how do we live and work together and strengthen our society in the religiously-diverse society that is the United States of America.

So it's civic and not theological. It's not about coming to agreement about – as Katie mentioned that, you know, whether we're all going to the same place or which god or how many gods or even alternate questions of justice. So because of that civic focus, it does create a lot of room and IFYC has made a lot of effort and certainly we could make more to include the non-religious community in this project because from our standpoint, it's a civic project. Everyone religious or non-religious stands as much to gain or to lose from its success or failure and it also includes room for folks who are quite theologically exclusive. So we work with people who – both communities and individuals who might very well believe that I as a Jewish person am not reaching heaven or able to attain salvation and nonetheless they're able to engage with me and with others in the project of civic pluralism.

So we – some folks are surprised to know that at one point, I think a full thirds or half of our staff were actually folks who identified as non-religious or secular humanists or some sort of variation around that theme as well as having very evangelical or otherwise theologically conservative folks on staff and in our programs.

Chris Martin: And you're also not focused on reason debate per se because you're trying to cultivate respect for the idea that religion can sometimes be built on revelation rather than reason. Is that correct?

Noah Silverman: Yeah. I mean I think there was a strand of interfaith work that started really in the 1960s and continues to this day in some corners, which I personally and I think many other people probably find really interesting, which is the sort of theological – like Katie let's sit down

and let's talk about the role of the bible or Jesus or any of these other servant-borne theological questions and my own spirituality and faith grows from that. So that's Katie's I presume. But that's actually not primarily what IFYC is about. We're really much more about the civic project of how do we figure out how to coexist and strengthen each other's communities in the here and now and because of that, the work isn't primarily about actually changing any individual's position, whether it be theological or political in that sense.

So a lot of the great work that HXA and Jonathan Haidt and other researchers have been doing is we're cultivating this notion of intellectual humility in sort of reason debate and democracy and we think that's really interesting and really important and probably aligned with what we're doing. But when it comes to religious identity, sometimes people hold their positions not because they think they've reasoned themselves into them but because it has been revealed to them through direct revelation or through scripture or through the authority structures of their tradition.

So it's not necessarily about recognizing the faults in your own thinking as much as it is about saying, OK, well, you and I might disagree about the nature of God or about where boundaries should be drawn in the Middle East or about what policies we should have here in the United States about any number of "culture war" issues. But we all agree that we should have really strong school districts. So can we work together on that?

We all agree that we would like a beautiful park system for all of our kids to enjoy. So can we focus on those conversations and figure out how to do that work together? And something of a – sort of more in line – agree to disagree on the issues that we just accept are ultimately irreconcilable. I mean Katie's notion of Jesus and my notions of Jesus are mutually incompatible and we just don't spend a whole lot of time talking about it. But when we do, I think we find that conversation enjoyable.

Chris Martin: Well, here is one of the rare instances of someone who is both Jewish and Christian.

Katie Baxter: Yeah.

Chris Martin: So for faculty who are interested in getting involved with some of the initiatives that IFYC has created, what would you recommend they do?

Noah Silverman: Well, if you are a faculty member at a CIC member institution, Council of Independent Colleges, we highly encourage you to apply for our annual seminar. It's a great opportunity to spend four, five days with your peers and colleagues thinking about these issues and in conversation and creating a community of practice around that.

But more broadly we have a ton of resources on our website, www.IFYC.org, that are specifically geared toward the classroom, everything from teaching tactics to sample syllabi, to assessment tools. We've developed a rubric on how to assess learning and behavior around these issues in the classroom. Then we also engage in our own scholarship and are interested in engaging with other partners around that.

So we recently coedited a book on the emerging field of interfaith studies and are always seeking further partners to think about writing and working and doing research.

Katie Baxter: I will add one of the resources that may be of particular interest for faculty who really want to think about engaging religious diversity in the classroom pedagogically is we offer curriculum development grants annually for teaching faculty who want to develop or redevelop a course.

Chris Martin: And people need to apply for those online?

Noah Silverman: Yeah, the application for that, you can find right on our website and as Katie mentioned, we offer those annually for work to be done over the summer. So the application is due in the spring and then it's opportunity for faculty members to do curricular revision work over the summer for implementation in the following academic year.

Katie Baxter: And I will add, we also offer parallel resources and campus-based grants for non-teaching educators, so administrators or professional staff who want to be thinking about what's happening with regard to student leadership and student activism or campus development for interfaith cooperation in other ways. We offer campus innovation grants.

Chris Martin: Well, thanks for joining us on the show. It has been great having you on.

Noah Silverman: Thank you for this opportunity. It was fun.

Katie Baxter: Thank you. I really appreciate the conversation.

[Music]

Chris Martin: You can learn more about IFYC at www.IFYC.org and in the show notes for today's episode, you can find links to some recent pieces by both Noah and Katie as well as by Eboo Patel, the Founder of IFYC.

My next guest is Julian Zelizer. He's the co-author with Kevin Kruse of *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974*. Kevin Kruse was featured on an earlier episode, episode 43. The episode after that features Jeffrey A. Sachs, lecturer at Acadia University in Canada. Thanks for listening.

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