

# Creating Justice *Together*



By Amanda Poppei

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I saw a meme on Facebook the other day, from Twitter user Marcus Halley (@word\_made\_FRESH). Here's what he wrote.

THEM: Is this a social justice church?

ME: To me, that's like saying "Is this a 'book library' or a 'food grocery store?'" We are a church, and because we follow Christ, we are called, among other things, to pursue justice.

I don't follow Christ, and I don't even serve a church; I'm the clergy leader of the Washington Ethical Society, a humanist congregation in Washington, DC that's part of the Ethical Culture and Unitarian Universalist movements. But with those minor (!) adjustments, Marcus Halley sure is speaking for me.

And he may be speaking for some of your students. Without a way to start the conversation, we frequently find ourselves unsure about what's appropriate to ask, and how to welcome in both students who are deeply religious and those who are secular. I'd like to suggest that Marcus Halley's words offer us an answer: justice, and its centrality to the religious message, can be the beginning of the conversation.

The movements that I serve, particularly Ethical Culture, are really built around the idea that part of what we do when we are gathered together in intentional community (ie, when we are a church, or a congregation, or a synagogue) is create justice together. In Ethical Culture, we follow the wisdom of our founder, Felix Adler, who back in 1876 said that the movement was a place

Continues on page 28

## Continued from page 27

where people could “Believe or disbelieve as ye list—we shall at all times respect every honest conviction. But be one with us where there is nothing to divide—in action. Diversity in the creed, unanimity in the deed!” In more modern words: it’s okay to believe different things about God, the universe, death, or anything else. But let’s find a way to take action, to do justice, together.

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It’s funny sometimes to work in interfaith settings when the premise of the movement I serve is, in some core way, essentially interfaith itself. My congregants identify as humanist, atheist, agnostic, theist, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist—they run the whole gamut. Of course they also share some core values, most of which would be called progressive or radical, and all of which center on the insistence of the inherent worth of every person and the idea that we are all connected. They choose to be part of a community where they know they won’t necessarily believe the same things as the person next to them, but they want to focus on the actions they can take together.

On one hand, this means that my tradition can be a particularly good partner in interfaith settings, or even a model for how to “do” interfaith work. In fact, my experience has been that just as social justice is the connector *within* our tradition, it can also be a powerful connector *outside* our tradition and between different movements and belief systems. Young children are often taught about the Golden Rule, and the idea that it is articulated, with slightly different wording, in almost every world religion. Although that can lead to somewhat simplistic thinking (“all world religions are the same!”) that ignores important differences of orientation and practice, there’s also some beautiful truth in it.

For several years, I’ve taught a class at the congregation I serve called “The Humanistic Impulse in World Religions.” It’s a bit of a world religions survey, and a bit of trying to help my congregants—who are often either refugees from a more traditional religious setting, or people who were raised in a totally secular environment—see that we’re not so different from our better known cousins in faith. We talk about the different histories and philosophies of world religions, and I draw the parallels to some of the values we hold dear. For instance, Ethical Culturists and Unitarian Universalists both talk about affirming the worth of every person. That has connections to the Christian concept of *imago dei*, or being created in the image of God. And we see that connection show up when we work on the same side of an issue, for instance supporting LGBTQ rights, with Christians. We may use different language to describe our values and why we



hold them, but at their core they are the same values motivating our justice work.

You can see this technique—using justice commitments as a way of building interfaith partnership—at work all over the country. Congregation-based community organizing relies on different faiths coming together to work for the common good. Eboo Patel’s Interfaith Youth Corps engages young people around their faith and their work together. And every natural disaster relief effort depends on people of many faiths sharing a commitment to healing.

The technique can also be used to facilitate conversation and understanding—even without connection to an actual work project. In many ways, a classroom really is an interfaith community, although it’s often unintentionally or unconsciously so. Students come together for shared learning without an explicit acknowledgment of the many different beliefs and values they bring with them. Talking about faith can be tricky in an educational setting, where some students may be steeped in a particular belief system, others may live entirely secular lives (and perhaps even feel ostracized or oppressed by traditional religions), and others may be in the midst of questioning their own or their parents’ faith. By moving the conversation away from tenets of belief and toward justice commitments, all of those students are invited in more deeply. “Non-believers,” after all, actually do believe in something, often many things—though they may articulate those beliefs in secular

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It also brings religious beliefs and ethical grounding out of the theoretical and into the students’ lived experience.

- How do their values prompt them to treat a new student in school?
- How about their response if a friend comes out to them as queer or questioning?
- How do their religious or ethical values inform their voting, or their engagement in politics?
- What about dating—do their religious or ethical values have something to say about how they approach that, both in terms of what kind of sexual activities they engage in and also what they look for in a romantic partner?

Continues on page 30

## Continued from page 29

At the heart, many of these questions are justice issues, because they are about how we treat other people and what kind of world we want to live in. And for the majority of students, they are more relevant questions than whether or not the Nicene Creed makes sense to them. They are certainly more *connecting* questions—welcoming answers that come from any tradition and from no tradition.

Sometimes the members of the congregation I serve will describe their approach to Big Spiritual Questions in this way: it's not that they have no opinion on God or an afterlife,

it's just that those aren't the most interesting questions to them. The most interesting questions are the ones that affect how we live, here and now, how we spend our time and money, how we build lives that are satisfying and move the world toward greater wholeness and equality. In many faith traditions, of course, the Big Spiritual Questions are deeply important... and they should be. But in an interfaith setting, it's often the here and now questions that help us to understand each other more deeply and to find commonality. Social justice isn't just a sideline—it's what gives life to our values. ●

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## Early Ed Event: *Fostering Kindness in Young Children*

With Tom Lickona, Ph.D. • Developmental Psychologist, Author

March 4, 2019 • New York, NY

### Day Workshop for Faculty

8:30am-4pm

Dr. Tom Lickona will review what we know about early moral development and then describe practical classroom strategies for fostering young children's kindness.

[www.csee.org/event/earlyednyc](http://www.csee.org/event/earlyednyc)

### Evening Event for Parents

6:30-8pm

Dr. Lickona will cover the 10 things primary caregivers can do to raise kind, respectful, and grateful kids. There will be time for Q&A and book signing afterward.

[www.csee.org/event/LickonaParent](http://www.csee.org/event/LickonaParent)