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'Thick Description' and Interfaith Solidarity for Social Justice

I am a relative newcomer to interfaith work in general, including interfaith work directed to the goal of achieving social justice. I feel I’m just getting started, really, but I’m eager to listen and learn, and discover how the work I do in my tiny corner of the Christian world can contribute to larger pluralist efforts to achieve social justice in Canada and other places. As a philosopher of religion, I enter this critically important dialogue with the conviction that all expressions of faithful religious living deserve to be understood and considered in their thick particularity, to the extent that this is possible. Of course, only very rarely might a scholar of religion achieve such a deep level of appreciation, even for what we might call the major ‘world religions’. While I don’t pretend to possess this level of appreciation, I maintain that gatherings such as this conference can still make room for what I, following Clifford Geertz, call the “thick description” of religious particularity (see Geertz 1977, chap. 1). In sum, I consider the creation of this kind of dialogical space to be sine qua non for the achievement of a robust civic solidarity, one that critically appreciates and celebrates our religious differences, as well as their potential contribution to increasing social justice in what many now describe as a ‘post-secular’ global society.

So, in these brief opening remarks, I thought I might share a tiny example of such thick description. Right now, I am part of a research group that is wrapping up work on a 2-year SSHRC Partnership Development Grant. Our study explores the different ways
that members of the Christian Reformed Church in Canada understand the relationship between faith and justice. Focusing on this particular religious community, the study is not an interfaith project as such. It’s relevance for interfaith work for social justice lies instead in the unique portrait of a particular Christian religious denomination it can provide to such an interfaith conversation. My hope is that this portrait can come alongside other portraits, and in this way stimulate interfaith dialogue about, and work for, social justice.

In addition to a literature review and key informant interviews, our partnership conducted a representative sample survey. A total of 264 Christian Reformed congregants participated in the survey, randomly sampled across fifty congregations. The survey results are considered accurate +/- 6%, 19 times out of 20. Several survey responses, I think, would make for interesting contributions to an interfaith discussion on the relationship between faith and social justice.

[Q10 slide] To begin, approximately 85% of those surveyed agreed that “supporting efforts to identify and address systemic injustice” was either “very important” or “somewhat important” to Christian faith. However, among a list of 10 items that might be considered important to Christian faith, this item ranked last, with “having and nurturing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as my saviour” coming in first (with over 90% declaring this item “very important”). Clearly, these response options are not mutually exclusive, but the priority is telling, I think. At the very least, it speaks to a tension between individualistic and communal or solidaristic understandings of what it means to live faithfully as a Christian. It would be very interesting to gauge the
extent to which this same tension exists in other religious communities, something we might want to discuss later.

[Q12 slide] Matters become more complicated when we recognize that not everyone in this group uses the same definition of justice. [Q19 slide] When asked to give a one-sentence definition of justice, 23% of respondents included concepts of fairness, equity, or equality in their definition (highest response rate). The second highest response rate, at 14%, defined justice as doing what is right in God’s eyes or faithful Christian living. One might surmise that less religion-specific concepts like fairness, equity, and equality would lend themselves more readily to interfaith dialogue on social justice, but I wonder, again in line with my commitment to thick description, if fruitful interfaith conversations might still be had concerning more religion-specific understandings of justice. I would be very interested in discussing together the possibility of interfaith dialogue that uses, rather than reduces, the variety of ways of expressing a religious commitment to social justice.

Finally, survey respondents were also asked about what they considered to be enablers and barriers to increasing their efforts to pursue social justice. I’ll restrict my comments to certain enabling factors, in the hopes that here too we might locate common ground amidst religious differences. [Slide Q28]. This slide shows 13 different response options of enablers of social justice, in rank order, including both religion-specific and non-religion specific items. [Slide Q29] The next question asked people to state any additional factors that they considered enabling. In 82 responses, two other enabling factors emerged as strong themes: 1) Doing justice as an expression of faithful Christian living; and 2) Seeing the results of working for justice. I find these additional responses intriguing, given that the first would seem religion-specific, while the second might name an experience common to anyone, regardless of
religious affiliation. This finding suggests the possibility that interfaith action for social justice can be nurtured and bolstered after people experience the fruits of their cooperative action. At the same time, at least for this particular religious group, such participation in interfaith action would need to be seen as an expression of faithful Christian living. Clearly, for this community at least, a call to participate in interfaith action would be unsuccessful if it ignored their particular understanding of what faithful Christian living means. It would be interesting to explore ways to honour these particular differences that nevertheless encourage religious citizens to move beyond their particular religious enclaves in a spirit of civic co-operation.

So, from this particular example, I have raised three questions that I think it would be important to consider when it comes to encouraging interfaith action for social justice [last slide]:

1. *To what extent does a tension between individual and communal priorities exist in the spiritual self-understanding of our various religious communities? What can people of different faiths learn about their own style of religious comportment by exploring this question together*

2. *How can interfaith dialogue and action use, rather than reduce, the variety of ways religious people express a commitment to social justice?*

3. *How can interfaith action for social justice honour particular religious differences in ways that also encourage religious citizens to move beyond their particular religious enclaves in a spirit of civic co-operation?*

I don’t have ready-made answers to these questions, nor do I think they are the only ones we need to ask. Yet they do seem important. I’ll conclude my remarks by letting you know that our research group plans to extend our exploration of the relationship of justice faith into a larger national research partnership devoted to the theme of religious citizenship. For this partnership we are seeking to include partners from various faith traditions, as well as existing interfaith groups like the University of Toronto’s Multifaith
Centre. Hopefully, then, this small snapshot of a particular religious community is only the start of a much larger conversation and agenda for social action.