The 2011 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture Faith † Introduction

The church's call to tend the soil of adolescents' faith is a joyful yet daunting task. We long for young people to develop a durable faith in Christ that sustains and empowers them to "seek first the kingdom of God" in a world where consumerism reigns, change is rapid, the economy is uncertain, and people of other religions are our neighbors. We want young people to engage such a world, fully knowing that they are beloved children of God and that life in Christ is a worthy adventure.

The theme for the 2011 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture is "Faith". These lectures consider what evangelism and interreligious dialogue look like in our postmodern context and examine faithful ways to engage religious pluralism. Eboo Patel addresses the complexities of raising children in their own faith tradition while living in a religiously diverse world. Rick Osmer discusses how important both Christian evangelism and interreligious dialogue are to the Church today as it seeks to live the gospel in a religiously diverse culture. May the ideas and stories shared here spark conversation around these topics in your own community and empower you in your ministry.

Faithfully,

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2011 Lectures

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Interreligious Dialogue in an Age of Diversity † Richard R. Osmer

In my first lecture, I pointed to the increased diversity of religion as an important dimension of the contemporary American context. America is in the midst of a second great wave of immigration, which brought 22 million immigrants to the United States during the last third of the twentieth century. Many of these immigrants were Hindus, Muslims, or Buddhists, expanding the range of religious traditions with a visible presence in contemporary America.

Social science research has repeatedly found that Americans in principle are tolerant toward other religions.[1] It is part of their civic morality. They affirm the separation of church and state and the right of all religions to assemble and practice their own faith. They also believe that non-Christian religions should not be singled out for discrimination and their members should not be subject to hate crimes.

The problem is that this civic morality does not go very deep. It represents ideals that are quickly compromised when matters become local or personal. Muslims, for example, have the right to practice their own faith, as long as they do not build a Mosque in my neighborhood. Hindus are welcome to live in my neighborhood, but I grow concerned when their son begins to date my daughter. A highly vocal minority of Americans go so far as to question the long-term impact of religious diversity on America's special destiny and support curbing some First Amendment Rights of certain groups.[2] They believe that America's greatness is a by-product of the moral and spiritual foundations of Christianity. They do not welcome the increased presence of other religions, at least in part, because they believe it will compromise American "exceptionalism" in the long-run.

1. Transition or Shift?

In *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell describe American society as currently experiencing a transition in its response to the most recent wave of immigration. Many Americans are uncomfortable with the visible presence of people who are different than themselves at work, in schools, and in their neighborhoods. They also remind us that the noisy response of a minority was also present during the first wave of American immigration between 1890 and 1920. During that period, the Ku Klux Klan spread from the South to states like Michigan and Indiana. The anger of its members was not just directed toward African Americans, but also toward Roman Catholics and Jews who

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had recently immigrated in large numbers to the United States. They offer a hopeful perspective, reminding us that today Jews are the religious group viewed most favorably by Americans, and Roman Catholics second most favorably.[3]

It is possible for Americans to move beyond their current discomfort with new immigrants and for the negative response of a vocal minority to become a thing of the past. But this is not automatic. Every historical moment in a society is different, and there is no guarantee that we are in the midst of a transition, not a shift in our ability to welcome immigrants. How Americans respond today will shape the future of their country. This is especially true of Christians who remain the largest religious community in contemporary America.

In this lecture, I focus on the importance of interreligious dialogue. In light of the new wave of immigration and increasing religious diversity, it is an important ministry of the church. At a recent conference I attended, one of the presenters used the term "dialogue" in his paper. In the ensuing discussion, his wording was attacked by one of the participants, with many others around the room nodding in agreement. The respondent said something like this, "Dialogue inevitably leads to compromise. In the end, it means we have to compromise Christian truth." I disagree with the perspective. It reflects what I called in my first lecture the "opposing magnet" approach to evangelism and interreligious dialogue. The more we place evangelism at the center of church life, the further interreligious dialogue is pushed to the side. Either we convert people so they think like us or we listen and learn from them, compromising our Christian perspective. These are false alternatives.

Evangelism and interreligious dialogue are both important, but they take place in different ways and have different purposes. Interreligious dialogue is best viewed as part of the educational ministry of the church. It involves growth, learning, and change over time. It includes learning about our non-Christian neighbors so we might better understand who they are and what they need. How else will Christians be in a position to practice neighbor love? How else will they contribute to a healthy civil society in which strangers as well as friends learn to trust one another and work together toward the common good? The willingness of Christians to dialogue with religions that are different than themselves demonstrates good will on the church's part. It builds a "cultural atmosphere" of trust, mutual understanding, and conflict resolution. Educating Christians in the capacities of dialogue goes hand in hand with the church's evangelical witness. If churches cannot even dialogue with those who are different than themselves, especially religious minorities, then what sort of message does this send to their neighbors? Evangelism includes embodying the gospel, not simply winning an argument. It goes hand in hand with interreligious dialogue.

Unfortunately, "No compromise. Hold on to *my* truth," has become the default mode in contemporary American culture. Opposing sides refuse to even listen to one another. Dialogue and compromise have become dirty words, from the halls of Congress to radio talk shows. How did we arrive at this point? In *American Grace*, Putnam and Campbell provide a helpful account of recent American history that underscores the role of religion in the current polarization of American society.[4] They also point to the possible role of religion in healing our divides, providing a perspective on the importance of interreligious dialogue in American churches today.

2. Polarization and Recent American History

The story Putnam and Campbell tell begins in the 1960s and falls into three chapters. The first chapter describes the "long sixties" as a major earthquake in American culture. It is followed by two aftershocks, the reaction of conservative Christianity to the sixties and, more recently, the "rise of the nones," (those who do not affiliate with any religion). By the end of this story, America is a divided nation and religion plays a major role in this polarization.[5]

The cultural earthquake of the sixties was driven by the Baby Boomers, who moved through adolescence and young adulthood during this period. They represent the largest cohort in recent American history and their movement through the life course has impacted American culture in different ways. They were shaped by a convergence of unique events: the widespread availability of birth control pills, the period of economic prosperity that followed World War II, and the rise of various social movements, including the second wave of feminism, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the counter-culture, and the ecological movement. As Putnam and Campbell note, the Boomers represent a classic example of generational change. The cohorts coming of age during the sixties would move toward values and beliefs very differently than their parents, and these would gradually disseminate across the rest of society as the Boomers grew older.

One of the clearest markers of this cultural shift was a change in the Boomers' attitudes toward premarital sex. Between 1969 and 1973, the number of young people indicating on social surveys that premarital sex is "not wrong" doubled from 24 to 47 percent. This drifted upward through the 1970s to reach 62 percent in 1982. A second marker is the Boomers' attitudes toward religion. The percentage of college freshmen who claimed no religious identification more than doubled in the five years between 1966 and 1971. This marked the beginning of Spiritual Shoppers (in Wuthnow's sense) on a wide scale in American society. The markers of premarital sex and religious identification signal much broader shifts in values and beliefs. In the decades that followed, cultural norms on fundamental matters would be questioned, like the role of women, divorce, homosexuality, and the nature of the family.

The first "aftershock" took place during the late 1970s and the 1980s. It represented a reaction against the sexual revolution, the decline of the "traditional family," and other cultural changes unleashed by the sixties. During this period, conservative Protestantism experienced significant growth. This included not only traditional Protestant denominations, but also non-denominational congregations, some of whom became widely influential mega-churches. Willow Creek, for example, was founded in 1975. In 1973, evangelical Christianity represented 23 percent of the American population. By the late 1980s, it had risen to 28 percent. During this period, "born again" Christianity received a great deal of media attention, and the Religious Right became a national force in American politics, driven by the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, and other conservative groups.

A substantial number of young people were affected by this resurgence of conservative Protestantism. Weekly attendance of young adults with some college education rose from 24 to 32 percent during this period, an increase of one-third. Most of this increase was found in evangelical and non-denominational churches. The attitudes of evangelical youth were different than their peers, moreover. They were more than twice as likely as their peers to respond that premarital sex is wrong in social survey research. Young people's attitudes beyond evangelicals also became more conservative. In 1974, for example, 62 percent agreed that homosexuality is always wrong; this rose to 79 percent in 1987. Opposition to the legalization of marijuana also rose from 50 percent in 1976 to 80 percent in 1990.

Contrary to common perceptions, the growth of evangelicalism peaked in the late 1980s and the surge was over by the early 1990s. By 2001, it represented 23 percent, the same percentage as in 1973. The resurgence of conservative Protestantism elicited a response, that Putnam and Campbell call the second aftershock following the earthquake of the sixties. They name this the "rise of the nones," that is, the rapid increase in the number of people claiming no affiliation with any religious community. At the end of "long sixties" the nones had risen to 7 percent of the American population, where it remained until the 1990s, when it began to increase rapidly. Today it represents 16 to 18 percent of the American population. Social science research, Putnam and Campbell argue, has discovered that the recent spike in nones can largely be attributed to a negative response to conservative Protestantism, especially among young people. As they put it, "They became unaffiliated, at least in part, because they think of religious people as hypocritical, judgmental, or insincere." The nones, they continue, believe that "religious organizations focus too much on rules and not enough on spirituality."[6]

Like the sixties, Putnam and Campbell believe, the nones represent a cohort effect. After 2000, 20 to 30 percent of young people coming of age were nones. Even those who continued their affiliation with a religious community began to hold values and beliefs that were different than those of the previous generation. For example, in 1990, 22 percent approved of homosexuality; this rose to 63 percent in 2008. Approval of the legalization of marijuana rose from 21 to 41 percent during this same period. On these and other issues, the nones aggregate at the most liberal end of the spectrum and are younger than the American population as a whole.

Much of the so-called culture wars, Putnam and Campbell argue, is rooted in the real differences on social issues, lifestyles, and voting patterns among the nones and evangelicals. Taken together, these two groups represent a larger proportion of the American population than in the past. In 1973, evangelicals plus nones comprised 30 percent of the American population. By 2008, this had risen to 41 percent. In effect, people have sorted themselves out religiously according to their moral and political views.

3. Interreligious Dialogue

On the surface, the prospects of interreligious dialogue look very dim in the story that I have just summarized. Conventional wisdom might lead us to conclusions like the following. Evangelicals, we might assume, are not really interested in interreligious dialogue—they are after conversion. The nones are interested in exploring various religious traditions to enhance their own spirituality, but they are not really interested in exploring in depth the differences in belief and practice of the major religious traditions. The religious center, which would appear to have the most groups likely interested in interreligious dialogue, is seriously weakened today. Yet things are more complex than conventional wisdom. Potentially, there are a variety of Christian groups and movements that might lead the way toward greater interreligious dialogue.

There is a growing sector of post-evangelical, emergent, post-liberal, and "new monastic" communities among the young. While these groups remain relatively small, they may represent the leading edge of change in the contemporary American landscape. They are very explicitly seeking to move beyond the liberal/conservative impasses of the present and demonstrate a willingness to cross theological, cultural, and economic boundaries. It is possible that they may be among the first to engage interreligious dialogue in new and creative ways. They are not threatened by such encounters and realize that evangelism must first be lived, embodied, and demonstrated before the gospel can be shared with any credibility.

Evangelicals, moreover, have become more diverse over the past fifty years. The growth of non-denominationalism and mega-churches has given rise to churches that are not constrained by the "party line" of denominational headquarters. It is possible that these congregations may acknowledge the importance of interreligious dialogue in an era of religious diversity. There are also mainline Jewish and Christian communities. Though they make up a much smaller percentage of the American population than in the past, they continue to contain a disproportionately large number of people who are highly educated,
have strong financial resources, and are used to dealing with complexity on theological and moral matters. Their voice, if added to the voices of others as described above, might make an important difference.

We would be remiss if we failed to grasp the importance of the voices of new immigrants and adherents of non-Christians themselves. As Wuthnow discovered in his research, they simply want to be understood and respected, above all else.[7] They are cognizant of the awkwardness that many in the Christian majority experience in broaching the subject of religion in relationships at work, in the neighborhood, and on the sidelines. As they become a larger portion of the American population in future decades, it is quite possible that they will develop the confidence to take the initiative in personal conversations and to encourage their own religious communities to engage in interreligious dialogue with other communities.

Unfortunately, at present there is very little interreligious dialogue taking place. Wuthnow's research discovered that leaders of Christian congregations do not view this as a pressing issue, even when they are located near another religious community. They employ what he calls "strategies of avoidance."[8] When asked why they do not initiate interreligious dialogue, leaders are apt to respond in the following ways:

"My congregation's members are so focused on Jesus that they're not really interested in learning about the teachings of other religions."

"If I tried something like this, nobody would come."

"Ecumenical efforts inevitably involve compromise."

"We focus on racial and ethnic diversity and that's more important than religious diversity."

"I'm very busy and this, frankly, is not high on my list of priorities."

Suppose these leaders were to have a change of heart. Suppose they were to recognize that interreligious dialogue is imperative in an age of religious diversity, not only for the sake of America's future, but also for the sake of a religiously diverse world that is becoming more interconnected. What might they do? I want to end this lecture by pointing to two approaches to interreligious dialogue grounded in large bodies of social science research. They do not represent everything that might be said, but they do represent a good starting point.

Contact Theory

There is a long body of research indicating that contact among people of different social groups reduces prejudice. This is commonly known as the social contact theory. It has focused on the factors reducing prejudice and promoting understanding across the boundaries separating racial and ethnic communities, different religious groups, and people with mental and physical disabilities. In a review of this literature,

Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp discovered that social contact alone does not account for changed attitudes.[9] Rather, four conditions must be present, harking back to Gordon Allport's early formulation of contact theory.[10] They add a fifth to Allport's original proposal. I will illustrate these conditions with my own experience growing up in a mid-sized town in North Carolina in the 1960s. During this period in the South, the dividing lines between white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews was only beginning to break down.

The first condition is relative equality among the parties. Social contact between a homemaker and a maid or yard worker is unlikely to reduce prejudice. The two parties must meet on relatively equal grounds. As a child, I barely knew any Catholics or Jews. When I reached middle school, however, this changed. I became good friends with Geoff King, with whom I played on the school's basketball team, and Sigmund Tannenbaum, with whom I built transistor radios. To say that our relationships were equal is an understatement. Geoff was a star player. Sigmund was a nerd before nerds were in; he could take apart and put together radios in his sleep. I became good friends with both.

A second condition is common goals. Social contact promotes mutual understanding and reduces prejudice when the parties are working together on something they both care about. The social chairmen of black and white fraternities might work together to throw a party so they could bring in a big-name band. They might work together on the PTA. In the case of my relationship with Geoff King, this was working together as part of a team to win games. With Sigmund Tannenbaum, our goals were more nebulous. Obviously, we wanted to be successful in taking apart and building transistor radios. But we also shared a love for science fiction and our exploration of the inner workings of the latest electronic gadget probably was fueled by some vague idea that we were exploring together the latest frontier of science.

A third condition is the support of authorities, law, or custom. While I understand what is being pointed to here, this condition gives me pause. Pettigrew and Tropp's review of the research finds that social contact across cultural divides is more likely to take place and reduce prejudice if it is sanctioned by relevant authorities. In my case, my parents heartily approved of my friendship with Geoff and Sigmund. If they had not, then it would have been much less likely that these relationships could blossom. As it was, I spent many nights at their homes, and they at mine. I can only hope that even if my parents had not approved, I would have found ways to build these friendships. The reason I hesitate in affirming this condition is that, often, duly constituted authorities, law, or custom are the last to acknowledge changing attitudes across racial, ethnic, and disability divides. Often, this starts on the margins. As hearts and minds are changed among the few and this begins to spread, only then do the authorities get on board. It is important for Christians to keep this in mind.

The fourth condition is intergroup cooperation. When groups work together cooperatively on common goals, they have the opportunity to move beyond widespread, prejudiced stereotypes. The integration of the military and sports teams is an important case in point. This has given the members of different racial groups the opportunity to learn that they have certain things in common and even share a common humanity. It also has given them the chance to meet as individuals and to begin to realize that stereotypes eradicate the very real diversity within various groups. This certainly was the case in my relationship to Geoff and Sigmund.

Pettigrew and Tropp add a fifth condition to those originally proposed by Allport: friendship. The relationship among friends is, perhaps, the single best social contact in which the first four conditions are

met and a level of mutual affection and caring is added. We do not take it lightly when one of our friends is subject to prejudice. We notice the slights and the barriers. We are more likely to speak out against such things and to even work for their eradication.

Social Network Theory
A more recent body of research focuses on the impact of the social networks to which people belong. Over several decades, researchers have studied the ways that social networks influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors on a range of matters including obesity, smoking, sexual practices, divorce, and church attendance. Information flows through such networks, often at an unconscious level. How this takes place is influenced by the structure of the network. It is also influenced by the kinds of ties people have with others in a particular network. Our relationship to our spouse or friends is different than our relationship to coworkers, church members, or internet contacts. Different kinds of information flows through the different networks to which we belong.

Many social network theorists argue that influence extends up to three degrees of separation.[11] This means that our influence on others and their influence on us extends to our friends (one degree), our friends' friends (two degrees), and even our friends' friends' friends (three degrees). We rarely think of our influence on others and their influence on us as extending beyond the immediate circle of people with whom we interact with on a regular basis—our family and immediate circle of friends or the small group of co-workers with whom we have contact with on a regular basis. Yet it is the network, not just our immediate contacts, that shapes many of our attitudes and behaviors. Many studies, for example, have traced the impact of such networks on obesity. The average obese person is more likely to have more friends, friends of friends, and friends of friends of friends who are overweight than would be expected due to chance alone. Our social network communicates a local norm of acceptable weight, which may begin with one or two people but then ripples across the relationships in which we are embedded (up to three degrees).

While this is the barest introduction to social network theory, enough has been said for me to make my point. Social network theory allows us to see the ways that changes in attitudes and behaviors among a small number of people can influence their social networks. For example, when my sister marries the member of another religion, and this alters my perception of her new husband's religion, my attitudinal shift may influence the attitudes of my immediate circle of friends, their friends, and even their friends' friends—three degrees of separation. This is especially the case if my friendship network is clustered together, that is, if some of my friends' friends are my friends as well. This intensifies mutual influence and the flow of information.

When coupled with contact theory, social network theory helps us see how social change at a local level—up to three degrees of separation—can be fostered. It is especially helpful in thinking about change within a congregation and its members' influence in their networks beyond the church. It allows us to imagine some of the ways interreligious dialogue and friendship might have a ripple effect. Here, I briefly point to four possible avenues of change.

First, it is important for the leaders of congregations to model and lift up the importance of friendships with the members of other religious communities. Interreligious friends are developing naturally among young people at schools, on sports teams, and in many other settings. Youth leaders are strategically located to interpret the importance of such friendships in our current context. Their words will carry greater weight if they are embodied in their own relationships with religious others. They will do well to encourage young people to process what they are learning in these relationships and to be open in sharing this with others, with their church friends and peers.

Second, it is important for congregations to make the study of other religions a regular part of the church school curriculum and to invite leaders of these religious communities to speak as part of these classes. Cognitive change is not as powerful as social contact, but it can prepare the way for such contact and help eliminate some stereotypes of the media.

Third, when it is feasible, congregations should seek opportunities to work with other religious communities to address important local issues. Urban settings often have organizations that bring Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Christians together to work in a food pantry or night shelter or to address some local issue like gang violence. These organizations often embody the optimal conditions necessary for social contact to actually change people's attitudes towards the members of other religious communities. With the support of relevant religious authorities, people gather as equals in an intergroup cooperative venture in which they share common goals and have the possibility of becoming friends.

Finally, Christian leaders have a special obligation to call out people in the media or their local community who draw on stereotypes and foment fear toward the members of other religions. Like obesity, smoking, binge drinking, and other negative cultural norms, prejudice, if left unchallenged, can spread silently through social networks. Christian leaders have the obligation to serve as counter-voices and to encourage others to do the same.

By way of conclusion, it is important to note that our examination of social contact theory and social network theory has altered the way many church members think about interreligious dialogue. It is *not* primarily a formal process for church leaders to examine the similarities and differences of their beliefs and practices. Rather, it is primarily about relationships, especially friendships. The possibility of such friendships is everywhere in American society today—at work, in our neighborhoods, among our children and youth, and in our service to the local community. Congregations are well situated to encourage interreligious dialogue at this level and to interpret the importance of this sort of dialogue in the contemporary American context. It may well be that the current level of discomfort and fear that many Americans experience today in the face of increasing religious diversity is only a transitional phenomenon, as Putnam and Campbell contend. But as they also note, religious communities play an important role in deepening divisions and in healing them. My goal in this lecture has been to help you recognize the importance of this ministry among Christian communities and to reimagine how it might be encouraged.

1. For a summary of research on this issue by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, see, http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=5229895&page=1, accessed March, 2011.
2. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 542–4, and Robert Wuthnow, *Religion and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 212–20.
3. Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 506–15.
4. Wuthnow's research in *America and the Challenges*, featured in my first lecture, gives more attention than Putnam and Campbell's American Grace to the different religious orientations that are present in American society and the ways these shape markedly different attitudes of Christians toward other religions. The social science literature on polarization is vast and includes seminal works like James Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) and a critical response in Morris Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005).
5. Putnam and Campbell tell this story in Chapters 3–4, and the statistics cited in the following section are found in these chapters.
6. Putnam and Campbell are quoting here from a summary of research findings by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. See, 131.
7. Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges*, 63–73.
8. Ibid, 244–47.
9. Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp have written a variety of articles on this topic. The best introduction to their research is *When Groups Meet: The Dynamics of Intergroup Contact* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011).
10. The origin of social contact theory is commonly attributed to Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1954).
11. Ibid, p. 28.