

Sacred Visions and the Social Good: an Interfaith Approach to Religion in Public Life

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The Shifting Landscape of Religion and Public Life in the U.S.

Issues of religion in public life have returned in recent years to the scholarship and public debates over the shape of American society with new force. Recent political studies have sharpened the public debate over religious affiliation and political involvement: including how evangelical culture shapes Republican politics (Lakoff, 2002, 2006), how the Democrats can renew ties with their religious constituents (Wallis, 2005), and how a broader, spiritually inclined class of “cultural creatives” is waiting to be tapped by either party (Ray and Anderson, 2001). Other studies have demonstrated how public-minded congregations contribute to public life, by increasing “social capital” among church and synagogue members (Putnam, 2000; Smidt, 2003) and through the support of congregations and their members of civic organizations, public philanthropy, and voluntarism (Wuthnow and Evans 2001, Ogilvie 2004, Ammerman 2005). Still others African American churches help rebuild the social fabric of their neighborhoods (McRoberts, 2003) and how racial ethnic congregations become centers of community organizing (Wood, 2002). This brief list shows how research in religion and public life has been renewed and is beginning to shape public debates over constructive religious engagement with public life in new ways.

Many of these studies continue a longer conversation, which focuses on how Protestants, Catholics, and Jews contribute to American life. Since Herberg’s classic study *Protestant, Catholic and Jew* (1955), publicly minded evangelicals and African Americans have joined the public action and debate over religion and public life, but often with an eye toward reshaping the larger, Judaeo-Christian discourse with new players and aims. What is interesting in the research, so far, is that most of the new evangelicals and African American congregations are less likely to collaborate with outside civic institutions (Hartford ORG)—like those supported by the United Way—and more likely to develop their own local missions and national avenues of direct political advocacy.¹ Those that come from non-denominational, free church traditions, in other words, do not foster connectional institutions, networks, or civic-collaborations like their denominational counterparts.² Newer faith communities in America; like Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus; appear to be following the free-church pattern of less civic collaboration, but without the avenues for political advocacy that evangelicals and African-American Christians have created.

How will multi-religious America establish new patterns of engagement between religion and public life? If new religious groups, for example, are focusing their energies on re-inculturating their traditions and on institution building, what patterns of public and civic engagement will they finally adopt? Some studies are beginning to address these issues,

¹ Wuthnow and Evans (2002) charts more independent patterns of community engagement for most African American churches, and the Hartford ORG study shows indications of more independent missions, less civic collaboration for African American churches and newer religious groups.

² There are some indicators that congregations with a tradition of denominational and inter-denominational collaboration are better equipped to engage in broader civic partnership, because their practices of collaboration, public debate, and compromise are part of their everyday organizational life.

either in a local way, or by seeking a wider pool of faith communities (Demerath and Williams, 1992; Farnsley, 2005), but both approaches are still dominated by the Christian-Jewish religious landscape. There are still very few studies of how local faith communities, from multi-faith backgrounds, can and do shape public action and discourse around issues that are important to them. Our study, set in the multi-religious context of the San Francisco Bay Area, was designed with the context of interfaith America as the emerging landscape of the nation.

Project Background, Method, and Goals

Sacred Visions and the Social Good began as a project of the Dominican University of California and the Graduate Theological Union in 2004, and was funded by the Marin Community Foundation. It was designed in collaboration with scholars of religion and faith-community leaders throughout the Bay Area, with two goals in mind. The first was to explore how local faith communities contribute to wider *visions and practices of the social good*, especially through their practices, traditions, and discourses. We wanted to know how religious communities generate visions and practices of the social good to share with or impact others beyond their own communities, and how they mobilize their community members to engage public issues around that vision. We also wanted to know if communities from very different faith traditions might collaborate to generate a “shared vision” based upon a creative engagement or transformation of their own distinct practices. As for our definition of “social good” we were especially interested in practices that contribute to a “just, sustainable and pluralistic” democracy, as defined by our early roundtable conversations and a survey of area academics and religious leaders.³

The second goal was to build new *networks of collaboration* between academics and religious communities in the region. This was of special interest to our funding partner, *the Marin Community Foundation*, who wanted to see more community-minded scholars work alongside local communities, including religious ones. To that end, we adopted some methods of “community-based research” (CBR), which invites the “researcher” to explore with community members the key issues, language, and tactics they want to adopt for public engagement (Strand, et al, 2003). But unlike most CBR, our projects did not focus on an intervention for social change, but instead explored the practices, traditions, and new collaborations available for such change. In other words, this was a “first step” toward future community-based, action-research.

The methods we employed for this project included collaborative planning and design, an on-line survey of Bay area scholars and religious leaders, follow-up phone interviews with select survey participants, on site interviews and focus groups with members of faith-communities, participant-observation, inter-faith education and dialogue, and educational action-research. The primary framework for this combination of ethnographic and action-research initiatives was one of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). We decided to engage three kinds of community projects in our research; a non-dominant spirituality-based initiative, an inter-faith initiative, and a community organizing

³ We carried out three roundtable conversations with some 40 area academics, religious leaders, and educators interest in civic responsibility, and a detailed survey of 42 academics and religious community leaders.

initiative. We shared initial findings with sections at a national and a regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion, and refined the interpretation of our data with their input.

Individual Project Descriptions and Findings

Native Voices and the "Earth as a Sacred Site"

This spirituality-based initiative tapped leaders from the Coast Miwok, Southern Pomo, Kashaya Pomo, and other northern California tribes to educate community leaders in local Native American traditions and practices around the "earth as a sacred site." It was directed by Arthur Scott of Dominican University and supported by the leadership of Colleen Hicks of the Marin Museum of the American Indian and Jeanette Anglin of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. The goal of the project was to bring the ecological/spiritual wisdom of northern California Indians to the attention of public policy makers, public educators, and community leaders in Marin County. This project adopted an education-action strategy centered around a three-day conference at Dominican University in July of 2005, entitled the "Earth As A Sacred Site." It utilized education-action methods, appreciative inquiry, survey evaluations, video transcripts and participant observation.

The Native tribes involved in this project have distinct backgrounds, land rights, and commitments. The Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo lost their native lands due to European-American encroachment in the early 1900's, but they have renewed Federal tribal status through the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, as of 2000. Although still without land of their own, they are active in restoring tribal cultural sites, language use, and customs, while seeking to develop educational and gaming facilities in Marin and Sonoma counties. The Kashaya Pomo also lost their lands around Fort Ross in Mendocino County, but had a small acreage restored to them by the Federal government in 1919. They have worked hard to maintain traditional practices and teachings, including their language, through the work of dedicated elders like Essie Parish and her family.

"Earth as a Sacred Site" brought to the Dominican campus Miwok, Pomo, and other Native speakers and leaders who shared their ecological traditions and practices with a cross-cultural audience of 65, consisting of Native Americans, educators, elementary school teachers, religious leaders, Dominican students and public policy leaders. The educational sessions covered traditional plants and medicines, land practices, storytelling, public land partnerships, burial site protection and more. We share some of the highlights here, with details about the leaders and persons involved, because of the relational and community oriented patterns of teaching and learning, guided by elders, in these Native communities.

The event opened with prayers in the revived language of the Coast Miwok led by Jeannette Anglin, Joanne Campbell and others. The prayer was followed by a presentation by Eric Wilder, tribal chairman of Kashaya Pomo, who discussed his tribe's creation stories, traditions and language, and the tremendous respect that his people have for the Land and "Mother Earth." He shared how traditional language unlocks the healing powers of certain plants and medicines. He also talked about the disparities between public perception and reality in the ordinary lives of his tribe and his concerns about passing on traditions to the next generation. His major message was "if we don't respect one another how can we respect the land"?

On Saturday, Joanne Campbell and Rene Shahrakh shared about native plants and medicines, and continued struggles for their preservation. World-renowned basket maker, Julia Parker and her daughter, Lucy, provided a demonstration of basket weaving. Martha Bonner of the Marin Community Foundation spoke on what groups can do to bring Native wisdom into mainstream consciousness. This was followed by a video and intense discussion of Wintu struggles to preserve sacred sites on Mt. Shasta. Public outcries were shared about the injustice and suffering of land-grabbing and misuse of sacred sites. Otis Parrish concluded the evening by sharing the healing stories and traditions of his mother Essie Parrish. He emphasized the Law of Reciprocity in native understandings of the earth, and its requirement that we care for “all our relations” among the creatures and plants of the earth.

Sunday’s activities began with a presentation by Dan Sherman on environmental partnerships such as Laguna de Santa Rosa Watershed. A team of public school teachers, lead by Betty Goerke of College of Marin, introduced ways of delivering Native cultural practices, traditions, and herb and plant use more effectively in the elementary school system. In the afternoon, Sage La Pena (Hupa) and other Native activists and educators lead presentations on Federal Indian policy and tribal sovereignty, sacred (burial) site protection, as well as how to integrate the sacred with the practical by developing ecological action plans. Natives discussed their mixed feelings about what it is like for non-natives to teach their native traditions and practices: gratitude that their traditions are being taught, and a deep desire for more native tribal members to be available or included in such teaching.

Participants identified numerous learnings and action plans from this event in their survey evaluations. Non-natives were profoundly grateful to learn more of the practices, traditions and history of suffering by local native groups, and expressed an “awakening” around the ongoing politics around sacred sites, land use, and environmental teachings of native peoples. Many expressed a new conviction to advocate for the protection of sacred sites, traditional plants, and land rights of native peoples. Native participants expressed profound gratitude to be together, share their distinct tribal traditions, and unite in the protection of sacred sites, the teaching of their traditions to the young, and land protection. While they appreciated the openness and solidarity of non-native participants, they expressed deeper interest in a wider gathering of California tribes, which did take place as the California Indian Conference at Dominican, in the fall of 2006.

The Native Voices Conference ended in a prayer circle with deep sharing around personal learnings and how everyone would impart that knowledge to his or her respective community. Native participants affirmed their family and spiritual connections with different tribal members present. They also modeled the intergenerational transmission of teachings, with grandmothers, fathers and mothers affirming their desire to pass on traditional ways, and with children present being grateful for the chance to learn them. Younger generation Native activists and leaders spoke with gratitude of their elders, some of whom had passed away. Non-native participants spoke of their deep appreciations for the honest sharing of stories of oppression and suffering by Natives. They also identified the joy of participating in basket weaving the numerous learnings about Native American care for the environment, and their heartfelt connection with Native causes of land and sacred site preservation. The feedback from the participants was magnanimous and edifying, the underlying thread was

that communication and conferences such as ours provided a better understanding, respect and appreciation of the Native Peoples' ways and wisdom.

The findings and outcomes of this initiative can be summarized under several themes:

- 1) Building Inter-Tribal Solidarity in Public Contexts: This event provided a range of elder-teachers and shared agenda around protecting the earth that allowed traditional, non-gaming tribes and more modern gaming tribes to cooperate and build solidarity at unusual depths. Shared concerns ranged from the loss of respect by their youth to the continuation of age-old traditions and rituals, the revival of native languages that have almost been forgotten, and the preservation of rituals, songs, stories, dances and arts. Natives and non-natives wrestled with the ambivalent impact of casinos, which on the one hand go a long way to improve living conditions among tribal members, but, on the other hand, can result in a crass materialism that erodes the spirit-based traditions of Native Americans. We believe this inter-tribal cooperation and solidarity was heightened in this public audience of Native and non-native participants, especially as stories of cultural genocide and struggle were shared.
- 2) Challenging and Transforming Non-native Ignorance: Non-natives were struck by the cultural livelihood and environmental practices of Native Americans today, and were graciously lead into contemporary native practices like basket-weaving, the healing use of native plants, and native storytelling. At the same time, Native leaders challenged non-natives to use the present tense when speaking about them , because “we are still here” and part of modern society. Non-natives became aware of the importance of Native women as tribal teachers, and gained a deeper appreciation for the principles of reciprocity and respect for the land in the light of habitat encroachments and global warming. There was a growing recognition of the need and some of the tools for weaving the native experience into all educational grade levels and disciplines.
- 3) The Power of Stories: Non-native participants, in particular gained a deeper appreciation for the land, for animals, plants and “sacred sites” in Native traditions. They were struck by the power of “Native stories” as venues for transmitting values and making nature come alive for their people and the wider public. Native storytelling—of creation, of sacred mountains, of elders and family—were utilized constantly to convey spiritual strength, moral guidance, and cultural integrity. Natives and non-natives began to adopt storytelling—of personal lives and their communities—as a primary discourse by the end of the weekend. The majority of participants expressed the essential need to balance mainstream American materialism with the spiritual beliefs of Native People if homo sapiens and the earth are to survive.
- 4) Truth Telling, Mutual Respect, and Cross-Cultural Collaboration: This event provided a safe haven for airing grievances about the way Native Peoples have been treated historically, about how modern institutions continue to run roughshod over Native rights, and how Native peoples are still marginalized by dominant culture stereotypes and ignorance. Native presentations and personal stories were filled with

accounts of struggling against dominant culture, and even reached a crescendo of lament and outcry at times. Natives and non-natives alike held this history of suffering and resistance in trust and mutual respect, while non-natives weighed the legacies of injustice their cultures and institutions have inflicted. While Native speakers and participants were forthcoming and spoke eloquently of their most cherished beliefs and deepest hurts, they also spoke of their hopes for a better, more enlightened dialogue with mainstream institutions that could provide a brighter future for natives and non-natives alike. Naming the wounds in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect was key to deepening cross-cultural understanding and cooperation.

- 5) Education as Guidance and Trust: Native presenters identified traditional education as a relational process of following the elders and learning-by-doing, rather than the dominant Western pedagogy of analyzing and asking “why?” This model of cultural apprenticeship emphasized learning by participating in cultural practices, as modeled by the basket-making session at the event. At the same time, Native tribal leaders shared their experience and interest in developing mass-media modes of cultural education—including the use of the web, video, and online interviews. To that end, a Dominican student, Sabrina West, developed the footage of the conference into an educational resource: “We Are Still Here”. Some Natives at the conference expressed discomfort in how non-native educators handled their customs and practices in the public schools, which we suspect had less to do with the well-researched content of those presentations and more to do with their pedagogy. Mainstream educators often use an information sharing, analysis model of education, rather than a traditional, practice-oriented method. There was a great deal of discussion about how to resource local public educators with a network of Native cultural teachers, who could bring a model of cultural apprenticeship and participatory learning to the public schools.

The Sufi-Buddhist Project around Practices of Social Justice:

This project, coordinated by Dr. Ellen Hammerle, of the International Association of Sufism (IAS) created a partnership between the Zen Buddhist community at Green Gulch and the Sufi community at the International Association of Sufism, both in Marin County. The goal of the project was to develop an understanding of the practices and principles in Sufism and Zen Buddhism that inform practices of social justice. In particular, we wanted to explore how a deeper collaboration between these two spiritual communities would affect members’ voluntary service, involvement in the social good, and spiritual vision. The methods included education-action research and participant observation of the Teachers Forums, pre- and post-event surveys of students, and student focus groups after the events. All the events were structured around four research questions:

- 1) What is social justice?
- 2) What does your faith teach concerning the role of social justice?
- 3) How do you practice and motivate involvement in social justice through your spiritual tradition?
- 4) How do you practice and motivate involvement in social justice through your spiritual tradition?

The overall framework was one of *narrative inquiry* in to the personal and communal stories of how spirituality and social justice intersect in practitioners' lives.

The Green Gulch community and Zen Center offers training in the Japanese Soto Zen tradition of Buddhism, which emphasized wholehearted sitting meditation and the clearing of mind toward enlightenment. It is a living, practicing and teaching community, integrating with the ecological care of seaside surroundings in Marin (<http://sfzc.org//ggfindex.htm>). The International Association of Sufism is an education, publishing, and practicing community of Sufis in Marin County, dedicated to sharing Sufi wisdom and practice with the English-speaking world (<http://ias.org/>). Sufism is a mystical tradition of Islam, drawing from both Shia and Sunni sources, that emphasizes the unity of all things in God and which utilizes poetry, meditation, and music in much of its practice.

The Teachers Forums took place in the summer of 2005 with students from both communities. This cooperative forum was made possible by the deep friendships that leaders in both communities had formed in over the years. This friendship among the teachers accounts, we believe, for the level of depth and mutual influence that both events fostered.

Seido Lee de Barrows of Green Gulch shared that the Bodhisattra vow guides practitioners of Buddhism to work toward liberating all beings by doing no harm, doing good and helping others. Social justice, in a retributive or restorative sense, is not a construct of Buddhist practice and principles. He makes the link with Buddhism through the awareness of impermanence and the impact of suffering:

... with this deep appreciation of impermanence, which is a kind of letting go, your real nature begins to show itself, and your real nature we call Buddha nature. So everyone's real nature is the nature of kindness, generosity, compassion. These are delicate and refined things, easily covered over, and easily confused, but are fundamental to the human life. And when there is suffering, the heart, the Buddha nature, the heart of compassion and kindness, generosity, is disturbed. It wants to do something about it. And the question arises, what can we do about the suffering we think we see?

Buddhists can understand social justice, then, to mean the deep penetration of impermanence through liberation. He shared a moving story of how Buddhists, according to their tradition, began sitting and meditating with the dying in a San Francisco hospital, until finally the hospital caught on, hired a hospice doctor, and began a hospice program. Volunteers from various religious traditions continued to sit with the dying. Seido Lee said: "... justice seems to have to do with fairness and unfairness. If you live in a community this issue comes up. Everyone feels that where there isn't justice, there's disease, *dis ease*, there's angst, there's lack of calm, there's a ground for grieving, delusion, to win the day. It becomes very hard for people to practice their practice, to walk the path towards liberation, if they're too disturbed by injustice. So from that point of view, justice becomes important within the system of Buddhism, because it allows people to pursue their deep spiritual yearnings and their liberation to save all beings." This contrast between the Buddhist practice of justice through compassion, in order to alleviate human suffering, and the Western emphasis of restorative or retributive justice to restore the balance or "scale" of justice (symbolized by blind Lady Justice) was clarified in Seido Lee's presentation.

Shah Nazar Seyed Dr. Ali Kianfar explored with students issues of justice through the metaphor of the jungle in which we live. Based on the premise that human beings, though created pure, develop inner struggles, desires and wishes referred to in Sufism as “Nafs” (desires, ego, wishes), humans want to survive, so they struggle with inner *nafs* of greed. However, it is the potential quality and character of every human being to act as messengers of the Divine, and human beings who invite us to our noble qualities are Teachers who guide us to this first justice within ourselves, which can then be shared outwardly through service in the community and society. Dr. Kianfar said:

Justice, according to the Koran, is a state that the human being can try to achieve. In fact, justice is the state of being for the human being as he is traveling and extending and improving the small self into the greater, greater Self.... And according to the Koran, the human being, even though he is a very small, small human being, can be the greatest eternal being also. Justice is a state of being in balance that can be achieved. The Holy book, the Koran, shares the light of wisdom for human beings to achieve the state of justice. Once the human being reaches the state of balance, then he or she becomes a servant of God. In that moment, the person becomes eligible for service.

He suggested that we return to the primordial religion of the cosmos, which is beyond and contains all religions. In that religion we are united by the light of wisdom and the guidance of knowledge. We can step beyond all traditions to create peace and justice in the world.

Seyedeh Dr. Nahid Angha shared that the focus of Islam is on the human being’s improvement to serve the Self and society. It is through the pursuit of knowledge that we achieve social good or justice. Dr. Angha shared the reality that society functions with divisions, classes and levels of people so that we are stratified into those who have and those who have not. Spiritual Teachers reflect non-attachment, no greed, kindness, caring for others, compassion, graciousness, generosity and practice acts of charity. In Islam, Ramadan is a month of fasting so that the practitioner remembers God and purifies him or her self from attachment. The money saved is given to the Teacher for a social cause. Seyedeh Dr. Angha said: “So just imagine, if we all listened to our own teachers of religion, every human being would have been at ease, at peace, comfortable; would use the time, or the life that this whole great universe has given that person, in the best possible way. We would not have hunger, we would not have so much of disease; everything would be taken care of. We would contribute to one another. Not only that, just imagine, if I participated in your life, then hardly I would declare war on your life, hardly I would destroy your friends or your families. That will not become a part of my pursuit. Your life becomes my life and I protect it as much as I do mine.” The friendship between the Zen and Sufis, she claimed, promotes justice in society. We sustain justice through compassion cultivated within our inner wisdom. This wisdom is a virtue we can act upon and share with others.

Based on the teachings of these Zen and Sufi Masters, issues of social justice create an opportunity for deeper spiritual practice, to pursue our deepest intentions. It is through cultivating inner peace and awareness that we can then share in service to others and action toward social justice. This inner peace is a point of balance within the human being. The root cause of injustice is ignorance. When we can model the beauty of faith and empathize

with the challenge our society presents then our values change, we become more compassionate. The teachings and practices are fundamentally a movement from within and outward; a by-product of meditative spiritual practices which are the heart of the Sufi and Buddhist communities. The faith communities guide public engagement directly through the inner connection with God. This creates intentionality based on wisdom and knowledge, which guide the practitioner to right action. When an action is aligned with pure intention then the goal is likely to be achieved. As spiritual practitioners, we become models for faith and belief in social action for humanity; social justice is manifested and sustained through presence and through direct action.

The cross-fertilization of the Sufi and Zen groups was based on mutual sharing and deepening process. It was as if the awareness expanded thereby facilitating a deepening of the energy within the group during the Teachers Forum and the Student Focus Group. A visceral exchange happened based on the depth of openness and the underlying foundation of the contemplative communities. This is the power of spiritual community. It is a wellspring that motivates faith communities and members into public life and social good.

Pre-surveys of the student-practitioners indicate some ambivalence around how well concepts and practices of “justice” and “spiritual practice” were integrated. Regarding the first question, “What is social justice?” almost all practitioners used Western language of “rights” and “equal opportunity” to describe social justice. When asked question 2, however, “What does your faith teach concerning the role of social justice?” there was a split between students who continued the “rights” language—as if indigenous to their traditions, and those who shifted the discourse to religious teachings of their traditions:

Ideally, the rules of the society will be a reflection and practice of divine rules – balance, order, harmony, wisdom, and love.

On a deeper level, Buddha’s awakening teaches profound interrelationship, which naturally find expression in universal respect and care for all beings. The Bodhisattva vow to free all beings from suffering, teaches commitment to the highest welfare of every person.

The main teaching that I have learned in Sufism... is that a just society is one in which each member practices to achieve their highest value, potential, and awareness as human beings, understanding that the human being is the creation of God and has the potential for divine wisdom.

Balance, starting in the individual, in the family, neighborhood, and out into larger society is essential to a just society. Social justice is the work and practice that goes into achieving balance on these various levels.

In question 3, “How do you practice and motivate involvement in social justice through your spiritual tradition?, many practitioners affirmed the everyday link between social justice practices and their communities, as in “I live in a community that promotes and encourages social justice”, or “IAS... is a humanitarian organization” too. But only a few made the deeper links between the spiritual practices or teachings of their traditions as sources of motivation for social involvement. One practitioner involved in the San Quentin Prison

Zen Meditation group answered: “Regarding with an open heart other people as fellow human beings as the most basic consideration, before any categories of nationality, race, inmate, sexuality, etc.” A Sufi practitioner wrote: “The guidance of my Teachers and the practices of Sufism are gradually and perceptively leading me to hold my balance in more and more situations. ...As I, as an individual, maintain my balance (mental, emotional, etc., and guided by awareness of a deeper wisdom and energy) I can bring that balance to my relationships, family, work, society, and in working for the rights of other people to be acknowledged.” In other words, some practitioners had already established a set of practices that moved from inner life to outer social engagement, as a natural rhythm in their spiritual life.

The focus groups with student-practitioners indicate a high degree of attentiveness, openness and reflection in relation to the content of the Teachers Forums. One practitioner captured well the “foreign language” quality of “justice” language in regards to Buddhism and Sufism, but the heart and practices are close to these traditions:

Social Justice or good is not a principle in the Buddhist or Sufi canon or a word commonly used among these spiritual traditions. However, service to humanity is cultivated by practitioners through our practices. Both the Zen and Sufi practitioners viewed human birth as a gateway to cultivating wisdom through transformation of consciousness.

A Buddhist practitioner captured well how integral actions of compassion and justice were to spiritual practice:

To sustain social justice or good we need to discover our inner balance and see the manifestations of our spiritual practice in others. We aspire to co-create a climate of goodness. We become the change we want to see in the world. We see the ripple in the pond as the effect of one good emanating from one point outwardly to reach others. We respect correct actions. We remain present with what is and suspend judgments. We have received growing awareness in our intention, motivation, breath, thoughts, actions and Selves by participating in this collaboration. We realized that inner awareness creates acceptance and increases empathy. We receive grace.

And one Sufi practitioner modeled the bridge commitments and mutual transformation possible between these two spiritual traditions around social justice:

Dr. Kianfar shared an interesting metaphor...of the jungle of life [which] necessitates the survival instinct.... Virtues cultivated through spiritual practice counterbalance the human struggle with ignorance and *nafs*, such as greed. Human beings are capable of ethical behavior and precepts, treating each other properly. We cultivate virtue like a light plugged into the socket; the human being can connect to the pure source. The innate essence of human soul is the breath of God, the pure light.

We practice to attain a state of impermanence with the appreciation to accept where we are. Human beings are easily distracted by veils of illusion. Social

justice can be conceptualized as suffering in Buddhism. The human being is in individual pain because she or he is outside his responsibility; oppression is injustice wrapped within the experience of suffering. Through social justice we can remove the sources of suffering. Empathy and compassion are expressions embedded in Zen and Sufi spiritual practice and principles that liberate the self and others.

In sum, Zen and Sufi practitioners agreed that social justice is every individual's right to be treated with compassion and respect. By modeling our faith in all actions and words we create justice. The inner state of awareness, peace and balance guides the practitioner's life so that we become social goodness. In fact, throughout the two sessions it was recognized that a visceral energy was co-created among participants that resonated with a peace that can heal and transform. Whether engaged within the Zen or Sufi communities, each of us became aware of our full time engagement in social justice work. It is not additional work, it is the work of the present moment in all that we do and are.

The post-events surveys indicate further steps among practitioners toward integrating the links between spirituality and social justice they practiced in the Teacher and Student sessions. One student defined social justice in more spiritual terms as "Balance and compassion within community." Another commented that the forums brought a new justice perspective to already established spiritual practices: "The main thing that this project brought to my attention is that the work we do in living a fulltime commitment to sustaining and offering our community life and practice at Zen Center is a fulltime engagement in social justice work...." Another student identified the teachings of his community as a movement from "God to self to society" based on "Charity (zakat) and service."

The real impact of these events, however, according to the post-event surveys lay in the mutual impact the two communities had on each other's understandings and practices around spirituality and social justice. In response to question 4, one practitioner affirmed the unusual nature of this interfaith encounter:

This research experience was different than many of the more diverse (more than two faith groups) interfaith projects I have participated in and had a different feeling to it. I learned that these specific Sufi and Buddhist groups have inner practices that include silence, non-judgment, who don't proselytize, or believe in original sin, to name a few of the similarities. Both traditions are also interested in overcoming ego. These values and related teachings may be seen within the foundation of social justice work in each tradition, in our attitudes about meeting each other, and in the respect I experienced amongst us in our coming together.

Several comments affirm the level of mutual appreciation, identification and transference of learnings that took place:

I gained respect for the compassionate beings and quiet listening hearts of the individuals in the Buddhist group. I was very impressed with how much they could say about Sufism from a brief talk by our Teachers. My experience was that they deeply listened to the Sufi teachings and worked to understand them, as the Sufis

also did with the Buddhist teachings. Questions arose from trying to understand, rather than from argument or pushing of views.

The Buddhists in the group were some of the more open and peaceful people I have met in interfaith work and projects. I also learned some specifics about service and social justice in Sufism... by some of the discussion and questions from the Buddhists, which will add to my practice of Sufism. It seemed that we became spiritual individuals coming together to learn, rather than two distinct groups (of Buddhist and Sufi) with different values or teachings.

Another practitioner went further to identify a newly emerging practice, created by the interchange of both groups.

For me, the most powerful idea that came from our discussion was to bring our spiritual energies together somehow to create a greater combined energy— such as by practicing meditation or chanting each other's chants together. This would be done not by mixing the practices, but by adding to each other's energy through deeply practicing together from each of our own traditions. I could envision making a beautiful chord where the beauty and strength of the individual notes harmonize.

One practitioner identified why such mutual learning and appreciation could take place:

My experience was that we were each firmly enough rooted in our own traditions that we could respectfully hear the teachings – both the overlapping and some of the differences – of the other tradition. I saw respect and lack of fear or argument in hearing about a different faith tradition. It was an experience that I will take with me as a standard for future research and inter-faith work.

In sum, the student-practitioner feedback of Teacher Forums presented a landscape for understanding that in Zen Buddhism and Sufism there is no separation between the practice and the principle of social good. Social Justice is a way of being grounded in the intention of the human being to see God's expression everywhere and to act rightly from the source of Divine love. The spiritual vision creates a responsibility within the human being and cultivates a capacity to honor life. The beauty of this collaboration has been witnessing this love with other practitioners of spirituality, holding this energy and cultivating the seed of sharing the mutual respect for life with others. Practitioners realized that the contemplative aspects of both practices created a resonant quality of understanding between the Sufi and Zen groups so that after spending time together, there was one group sitting together. Attaining this state was important toward understanding that social good sustains itself once awareness is stabilized within spiritual practitioners.

This project was rich and multi-faceted, so we summarize here the overall findings:

- 1) Contemplative Quality and Language of the Heart: The western language of social justice was transformed by these contemplative communities into a language of the heart mind and spirit, which emphasizes that social justice arises from right intent

and clarity of action. Ultimately, the challenge for humanity lies in learning to be as well as do the social good.

- 2) Modeling by Teachers: The history of friendship and respect between the teachers laid a foundation for the above transformation, especially as teachers served as direct examples of spiritual experience, practice and wisdom.
- 3) Teachings and Practices move from inner to outer: The contemplative practices of both traditions reinforced a shared commitment to the movement of social justice, first from within, then outward toward relationships and the world. For social justice to have authenticity, practitioners must first carry out its principles in their own minds and lives.
- 4) Mutual Respect and Understanding: Zen and Sufi practitioners experienced deep respect from each other, which allowed each tradition to nurture and transform the other, resulting in a new alliance of spiritual practice and insight around justice. The shared chanting, borrowing of each other's terms and rubrics, and the bonds of spiritual friendship formed were testimonies to the deep level of interaction and learning in the two communities.
- 5) Arising awareness: The Visceral Energy Created: Telltale signs of transformation and building community came through a process of mutual deepening—in sharing each others' practices and learnings and in the visceral energy that resulted. There was a sense of shared spiritual wisdom and the energy of enlightened minds at this event.

Berkeley Organizing Churches for Action (BOCA) Youth Project:

This project, conducted by Dr. Mark Wilson of the Pacific School of Religion, GTU, used ethnographic methods to evaluate the successes and failures of faith-based community youth organizing by BOCA, “Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action.” As an affiliate of the Pacific Institute of Community Organizing (PICO), BOCA was organized in 1999 as a faith-based community organizing group whose primary purpose centers around empowering members of congregations to build relationships with local neighbors and to translate their personal faith into political and social action. PICO methods revolves around two principles: 1) power is in relationships, and (2) faith and belief are primary sources for community organizing. The PICO community organizing model, to which BOCA adheres, emphasizes building one-to-one relationships between neighbors and members of communities of faith, who then work collaboratively on social action projects out of their commitment to the ideas, values and beliefs of their faith. BOCA now consists of 13 congregations in Berkeley, which represent some 8,000 church members and residents of the Berkeley community and wider Bay Area, and which organize and initiates political action around social concerns involving (1) education, (2) immigration, (3) health care, and (4) housing. Youth have been identified as central to each one of these socio-political concerns, which lead BOCA to form a sister organization, Berkeley Unifying Youth For Action (BUYA) to engage the activism and voice of youth in community organizing.

The hypothesis of this study is that the “relational model” of PICO style organizing does not adequately address differences of *age, race, and class* that the youth experience in their congregations and in BOCA organizing, which may in turn account for a decline in youth involvement. To answer these questions, ethnographic research methods and content analysis were utilized. Data from this study was collected from four racially diverse focus groups comprised of youth in four BOCA affiliated congregations: (1) First Congregational Church of Berkeley (a middle class white congregation), (2) McGee Avenue Baptist Church (a working to middle African American congregation), (3) Berkeley Chinese Community Church (and middle class Asian congregation, and (4) St. Joseph the Worker (a congregation with high involvement in BOCA and BUYA from the working class Latino and immigrant community). Three focus groups with youth and a fourth with youth leaders were carried out. A protocol of questions was used to create dialogue and discussion, and respondents were asked to fill out a biographical profile describing how they view the relationships between the sacred and social, between the neighborhood and their congregation, and between faith and community organizing. In addition, the youth were asked to submit artistic drawings of these relationships. We received forms and drawings from and had conversations with over 20 youth and their leaders from these congregations.

The findings focus on youth perceptions and analysis of external and internal factors that inhibit effective community building and organizing among them. The art work and comments of the youth point to the following external or social factors that affect their views of faith, community organizing and the common good: (a) ecological shifts in the neighborhoods of the congregation, (be) class and economic disparities of the neighborhoods from which these youth come, and (c) the resulting racial polarization between the communities of BUYA youth, given these shifts and disparities. A central metaphor and image that emerged in the art work of white and Asian youth in the suburbs, for example, were neighborhoods surrounded by boxes and prison bars, descriptions of middle class neighborhoods as removed, “bubble” communities where wealth and social privilege is abundant but the recognition of social and class oppression and the need for social justice is scarce.

Some youth from the predominately European-American and Asian-American congregations, for example, shared comments that highlight the gap between their congregation’s neighborhood and their home neighborhood:

“I go to the First Congregational Church of Berkley. I live in North Berkeley. The people of North Berkeley are affluent and need nothing....”

“I attend First Congregational Church of Berkeley [but] I live in Albany.... The greatest need of the people of Albany is knowledge. Most of the people don’t know what the real (poverty stricken) world is like outside the perfect bubble of Albany.”

“I live in a relaxed community neighborhood. Nothing really exciting happens... [unlike the area around church]...”

“I actually live an hour away so I am not very familiar with neighborhood [around the church] and it’s needs.”

These comments from suburban youth characterize relatively stable home neighborhoods of wealth and privilege, in contrast to the shifting, often gentrifying neighborhoods and ecologies of their congregations—a gap that makes it difficult to organize politically around a common sacred vision of the social good.

In contrast to the boxed, gated, and relaxed “bubble” communities in the art work and descriptions of white and Asian BUYA, the metaphors used in the art work of African American youth in the study include “R.I.P.” in scripted tombstones, guns, and scenes of violence. These are contrasted, however, with strong, life-giving images of supportive family members, the bible, crosses and church buildings. The African American youth in BOCA also come from outlying communities, but they are the shifting, challenging neighborhoods of Richmond and Oakland. Latino youth from St. Joseph the Worker were more like to come from the local Berkeley neighborhood. The affluence and comfort which white and Asian youth in the study experience in neighboring suburbs differs significantly from the reality of violence, death, substance abuse, and social stigmas in the drawings and lives of African American youth. At the same time, the African American youth depict their church in a much more positive light, as an alternative to the violence and social oppression around them:

The church is very nice place to come to and worship..., with family and friends. My neighborhood isn't the best but it is a work in progress. The greatest need for the people is to take weapons, drugs, alcohol and all that bad stuff off the streets.

I think the church is very nice, [but] I think people should stop killing people [in the neighborhood].

The people in my church treat me very well. Anything I do people complement me [there]. Some people show no justice towards me in my school or neighborhood because they make fun of who I am, and how I dress, and how I talk, people hate me because of the good grades I get....

While these youth describe their neighborhoods as trouble places and “works in progress,” they contrast that with depictions of their church as a place of safety, protection, and peace from the social conditions of racial inequality and economic injustice. One youth, taunted at school as “white” because of her good grades, receives support and affirmation for her scholarship among her Black sisters and brothers at church. This positive view of the church among these African American youth included positive images and references to the Bible, crosses, and Jesus in their art and conversation. The different experiences of church and home neighborhood between white and Anglo youth and that of African-Americans in the study points to the barriers of class, race, and neighborhood socialization that must be overcome if the alliances and shared vision of the social good were to be developed for youth community organizing.

The youth in the study also identified internal factors that influenced their motivation and ability to organize for the social good in their communities, especially based on faith principles. They identified several dynamics and features of their congregations that challenge their ability to link the Christian faith with social action through BOCA: (a)

transitions in leadership, (b) aging congregations with a generational gap in how faith and social action are interpreted, and (c) the resulting marginalization of youth voices in their churches. These internal characteristics were identified by the youth, regardless of their class and racial background:

The church is also a work in progress to find our new pastor....

Our church is small [with a] little over 100 members. I think our church community needs to reach out more and expand because our elder members are dying and we haven't done much to recruit [younger] people to our church.

The church has very few members compared to it's old size

Berkeley Chinese Community Church was founded over 100 years ago. [There are] lots of older member of the congregation, but we need more programs that are appealing to the youth! .

We need spiritual renewal and a stronger leadership.

In the cases of McGee and St. Joseph the Worker, the vision and work of BUYA has been altered by changes in pastoral leadership that involve retiring pastors, pulpit searches, and changes in the staff and lay leaders of youth programs. For Berkeley Chinese and First Congregational youth, internal factors have less to do with shifts in leadership and more with aging congregations where the needs and beliefs of the youth are sometimes unrecognized and not heard.

Although youth of different classes and races shared concerns about changing leadership and a generation gap with church elders, there is a striking difference among the youth between the way faith is understood and valued as a resource for social change. In contrast to the protection and safety that African American youth in the study reported to find in the theology, rituals and programs of the church, the art work and metaphors drawn by Asian and white youth depict a difficult and conflicted relationship with Christian beliefs and social action. The drawings and comments of white and Asian youth express more disillusionment about the link between faith and ethics, and they even question whether or not a vision of the common good can be sustained by Christian beliefs as they know them.

I think that religion--specifically Christianity—is not necessarily to have a just society or to be a good person. Religion is not exactly the same as church, as someone can be religious or spiritual without attending church.

Justice – we don't know what justice is. Good in society – we could use more examples.

I feel it's our own duty as people to maintain a level of morals and ethics, regardless of religion. I [believe that we were] all are born good and only learn bad.

I feel that “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind” and that violence is unnecessary. I also feel that God is not the only thing to believe in and I’m not even sure there is a God.

America has no sense of social justice. It’s disheartening.

In short, white and Chinese youth in the study had not yet embraced a vision of the Christian faith as a sure resource for shaping the social good around them. Even though some of them wanted religion to be such a resource, as depicted in an image of the globe covered by a peace sign, and a comment that, “Justice is needed for a society, and [it can] get integrated into church and religion,” it was not clear to them that Christianity as they knew it could be a source of such hope. By contrast, African American youth affirmed the church’s support, social network, and faith message as sources of hope and inspiration for pursuing a better world around them. They had not yet given up on the faith of their fathers and mothers.

In conclusion, Mark Wilson hypothesized in this project that the two PICO principles of (1) power in relationships and (2) faith as a source for community organizing, were difficult to sustain among the youth in BOCA. The key barriers, he suspected, were (1) historical of ideas about faith, race and class that persist and transcend structural networks and relationships in community organizing, (2) the demographic shifts and ecological changes caused by the gentrification of BOCA neighborhoods, and (3) the assumption that “relationships,” pluralism and diversity can be created between people of different racial and class background, particularly youth, without taking more seriously race and class inequalities. These hypothesized barriers were largely confirmed as inhibiting factors in conversations with youth in the study. In particular, external factors like neighborhood shifts and change makes “power in relationship” next to impossible, given that the relationships youth are asked to develop are not with residents, families, and young people like themselves, but usually with those in a radically different neighborhood context near their congregations. Their everyday, neighborhood relationships are with youth and adults in a very different life context than those in the church neighborhoods. Here the implication for sustaining a vision of community organizing is challenged to take into consideration how to facilitate relationship building between communities of people who, in the words of Berkeley Sociologist, Ron Takaki, come from quite “different shores.”

This research also highlights internal factors of congregations that make the second BOCA principle, “faith as a primary source of community organizing” difficult to sustain with youth. The challenge and difficulty of sustaining the vision and practice of faith is due to the disillusionment and doubt about Christian faith that some youth connected with their sense of marginalization and disempowerment in their aging congregations. Transitions in pastoral or youth staff also made the connection between faith and social justice more elusive. This finding has been most informative to BOCA’s Executive Director, the Rev. Andy McComb and adult leaders who were a bit surprised with the doubt and disillusionment of European-American and Asian-American youth. This research provided the youth in BUYA an occasion to be honest in their critique of faith and the sacred traditions of Christianity that is sometime missed and not affirmed among the adults who lead them. The adult leaders admitted that some adult members of BOCA did may even be resistant when pushed by community organizers to see the importance of uniting faith with

political action, especially where race and class are concerned. Here the implication for sustaining a vision of community organizing within BOCA is challenged to embrace a vision of Christian belief that just as honest about messages that hinder the common good, as it is about the social gospel that encourages it. And in this challenge, the youth are models to be heard and to lead the way.

Shared Themes and Collaborative Findings:

While the projects were quite different—in setting, participating communities, and research methods employed, we were struck as a research team how many shared issues there were between them. We offer a brief summary of those issues here, with the hope that further opportunities for collaboration and research around issues of religion and public life in the Bay Area.

- 1) *Inner/Outer Journey:* The Sufi-Buddhist collaboration and the Native Voices projects highlight the importance of connecting the personal, inward spiritual practice with the outer work and public engagement of the community. Part of what is lacking in some of the BOCA youth programs is the depth and effectiveness of this connection, especially in terms of faith idioms and themes that the youth identify as their own.
- 2) *Finding New Language:* The Sufi-Buddhist project highlighted the importance of locating Western discourse about “social justice” in the contemplative language of each faith community: right intention, service, or the liberation of suffering. The Native Voices project offered a distinctive spiritual framework for encountering “The Earth”—not only as a fragile ecosystem, but also as a system of “relations” and “families” that all human beings are bound too. BOCA youth are struggling for authentic language about their own faith in relation to the world, a theme that informs the upcoming Hip Hop Conference.
- 3) *Friendships Among Leaders:* Each of the projects capitalized on the friendships or rapport between spiritual community leaders as a means of enhancing programmatic and research development. The Native Voices project built upon the close ties between the principle researcher, the Marin Native American Museum, and tribal leaders among the Coast Miwok and Kashaya Pomo. The Sufi-Buddhist project drew upon the respected friendship of leaders at IAS and Green Gulch to a deeper collaboration. And the researcher of the BOCA youth project knew some of the congregations and the BOCA leadership in a way that gave him trusted access to various youth groups. The leaders’ rapport provided an avenue into collaborative work and became a bridge between the communities that was strengthened through the work.
- 4) *Symbolic Migration:* The language and spiritual practice of each faith community in the Sufi-Buddhist project crossed over and enriched the other: both groups began to articulate views of compassion, suffering, overcoming ego, and working from “the heart” that was reinforced by the visceral energy of meditation and chant in each other’s presence. The Native Voices project established a norm of storytelling—about native traditions, relatives, the earth, and personal biographies—that

permeated and reshaped the discourse of participants. The BOCA youth demonstrated critical awareness, artistic imagery and language about the tensions between neighborhood and church, world and faith that BOCA leaders plan to address more directly in the future.

- 5) *Generational Differences:* The generational gaps were most apparent in the BOCA youth project, where many youth expressed skepticism about the adult language and practices of faith. Among African American youth, however, the generational dynamic was less of a “gap” than one of finding a safe haven and value in the adult church world. In the Native Voices project, generations became a reference point for strength: of wisdom that had been passed down, of leaders and role models for Native identity and authenticity, and of ongoing inspiration and presence, even from those who had died. The very survival of teachings and means of practice (from medicinal plants to basket weaving) depended upon deep inter-generational respect and gratitude. In the Sufi-Buddhist project, the power of respect for transmission of wisdom was described more as a Teacher-student relationship than in generational terms.
- 6) *Multiple Identities:* Several leaders and participants in the Native Voices project described “living in two worlds” between dominant culture and Native American culture. Some highlighted the struggle and tension between the two worlds, while others embraced the gap between them as a mission to be overcome through education and advocacy. Still others spoke of multiple tribal affiliations as a challenge, but also as a strength by extending, multiple family relations. Several Sufi-Buddhist participants identified the solidarity between them—as members of non-dominant, contemplative traditions—as a source of strength for living in a society that either had a very different religious framework (like original sin) or little spiritual appreciation. The BOCA youth spoke of many sources of spiritual and cultural identity—beyond their congregation—that they wanted to draw upon to be more effective in engaging justice issues in the world.
- 7) *Engaging Dominant Culture:* Participants in the Native Voices project combined laments against injustices by dominant culture with plans for education and advocacy in ways that were both healing and challenging. The more participants named injustices and claimed the spiritual strength of their traditions, the more prepared they seemed to engage dominant culture pro-actively. BOCA youth identified obstacles imposed by dominant culture—especially along race and class lines—that prevented them from mobilizing shared faith commitments as a vehicle for social change. The Hip Hop conference will seek resources of youth culture that can strengthen such mobilization.

Conclusion: New Patterns of Collaboration in Community Research on Religion

The patterns of collaborations between scholars and religious or community leaders grew increasingly on our research team as these projects developed. We wanted to model that collaboration in our own planning and reflecting sessions as a research team, by including religious leaders and practitioners regularly from at least two, and at times three, of

the projects. We attended a Community Based Research training session at San Francisco State. And we held a writing workshop together to explore shared writing ventures, like this one, and public speaking opportunities like those at the American Academy of Religion. The panel presentation we offered at the California chapter of the American Academy of Religion in Southern California, spring 2006 was a highlight of that collaborative practice.

We also noticed that collaborations between community-minded scholars and reflective practitioners—who seek greater opportunities to understand and reframe their own practice, deepened as projects developed. The sustained scholar-practitioner collaboration in the Native Voices project created a number of surprises and changed practices: from new forms of collaboration and trust between tribal groups, to new insights about how Native Americans negotiate the worlds of tradition and dominant culture, to facing limits of how much a scholar or an educator can say for or with a Native American community. The Sufi-Buddhist collaboration utilized research and learning as a vehicle to bring two communities closer together—in teachings, practice, and social commitment. The Teachers grew closer in their appreciation of each other’s communities and practices, and the student-practitioners created new bonds of shared spiritual practice and understanding. All three projects exhibited levels of mutual engagement by scholars and community practitioners in ways that were mutually transforming of their work.

While the discrete findings of individual projects and the shared themes and findings of the “Sacred Visions and the Social Good” projects are in themselves valuable, we believe the most important lesson of this research initiative has been the modeling of a new form of collaborative, practice-oriented, community-based research that local scholars, religious leaders, and community funders can embrace. Newer religious communities, like the Sufi and Buddhist, have fewer regional and national institutions to mobilize their traditions and practices into American public life. Historic communities, like California Native Americans, are spending collaborative energies on defending or developing land and other rights, and they do not have ongoing settings for collaborative learning, teaching, and public advocacy around public issues that affect them. Mainstream religious groups—like the Protestants and Catholics in this study—often do not reach more marginal members, like their youth, with opportunities to reflect and act upon the links between their faith and social change. Many community foundations⁴ and other funders have allergies to religion on the one hand and research on the other, but we believe this project offers a new, persuasive case for why community based research in local religious communities is important to every American community. The emerging resources to shape a more just, sustainable, and pluralistic society are all around us, and more projects like this are needed to help cultivate the harvest.

⁴ Fortunately, the Marin Community Foundation is one of only a few in the country that has a religion program and staff member, but its attitudes toward “research” are still tied to more traditional, academic styles of research, that do not serve community needs directly. This model of scholar-practitioner collaboration around community-based research, we believe, can change those attitudes.

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