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,

Dayle Gillespie Rounds
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry
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2011 Lectures

Eboo Patel  American Muslim Child
Richard R. Osmer  Evangelism in an age of Religious Diversity
               Interreligious Dialogue in an Age of Diversity
One afternoon when my son Zayd was three and my wife had come home early from work to be with him, she called to deliver some news. Zayd was racing his toy cars up and down the hallway of our third floor condominium and chanting, loudly and repeatedly and in Spanish, the Lord’s Prayer.

“Must be Luz,” I said immediately.

Luz is our nanny. She had been a judge in Columbia, and she brought her high regard for education and her deep Catholic roots with her when she emigrated. She had helped Zayd learn how to read and write, taught him how to kick a soccer ball and had gotten him out of diapers at a remarkably early age. The love she had for our children was more like a grandmother than a nanny. I had come home from work more than once and seen them dancing vigorously in the living room to the Red Hot Chili Peppers (Zayd’s favorite band). I just shook my head and smiled, thinking, “After eleven hours of playing soccer, chasing him around the park, taking him to the library, making his lunch and his many many snacks, you have the energy to dance with him? That’s love.”

Luz recognized the importance of teaching kids calm as well as encouraging crazy, which is probably where the lesson on the Lord’s Prayer came from. She knew Shehnaz and I were Muslim. We talked about it every Ramadan, when I had to explain why I wasn’t eating breakfast. After her brother died, I told Luz the prayer Muslims say when we hear of a death, Inna Lilahi wa Inna Iabi Rajiun, meaning, “We are For God and We Return to Him Without Doubt.” “Very beautiful,” she said, repeating the Arabic slowly in her South American accent, and gave me a big, teary hug. She had seen the Arabic calligraphy around our house, the biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, the copies of the Qur’an. Still, she didn’t see a problem in teaching Zayd a prayer from her Catholic faith. I had to decide if I did.

One of the most frequent questions I receive when I give speeches on interfaith cooperation is whether young people should know their own faith before they engage in interfaith work. My standard response is to tell the story of how babies are delivered in a typical American hospital. I imagine it as an institution American Muslim Child † Eboo Patel

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founded by Jewish philanthropists (Mt. Sinai, for example, or a Jewish hospital), with a Muslim doctor presiding over the delivery, a Hindu anesthesiologist administering the epidural and a Catholic nurse helping the mother push and shooting warning glances at the hyperventilating father-to-be. My point is this: we are literally born into a condition of interfaith interaction. For most of us, especially in urban and suburban America, the world of religious homogeneity simply doesn’t exist anymore. The challenge, then, is to nurture our children into our faith tradition in the world that is—the world of religious diversity.

The answer felt sufficient to me. In fact, I took some pride in it. But some of the questioners gave me looks that suggested they were unconvinced. As the Muslim leader of an interfaith organization, I wasn’t sure why they were skeptical. As the Muslim parent of two boys, I get it. They weren’t asking about the abstract social dynamics of raising religious children in the modern world, they were asking about the present and particular challenges of raising their religious children.

Luz was far from Zayd’s only religious influence from a tradition outside of Islam. Zayd attends a Catholic school that has services every Friday, prayer before every meal and morning readings about Catholic saints. He listens well and learns quickly. On our annual family holiday to Florida, we drove past a statue store and Zayd pointed out the window and shouted, “Look Mommy, it’s Mary!” He’s got the Easter story down pat—“the bad people made Jesus go on a cross. They hurt Jesus with nails, but Jesus was still nice to them. Jesus went to the Father for a day, and then he came back. Jesus always makes good choices.”

We make Zayd sing a song while he washes his hands so that he rubs long enough to get them clean. He has recently switched from the hand-washing song, “Top and bottom, top and bottom / In between, In between,” to, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”

Should I tell Zayd to stop singing Jesus songs? To pray in Arabic before meals at school while the other kids are all chanting, “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost?” We tell his teachers not to give him any pork—no pepperoni on pizza day, and no ham on Green Eggs and Ham day. Do we tell them Zayd needs to go somewhere else during the Easter lesson? Do I just let Zayd sit through that and then tell him at home that we don’t believe Jesus died on the cross and we don’t believe that God has a son, but we do believe that Jesus forgave the many people that were not nice to him and that he always made good choices? As confident as I felt giving sociological answers on the interfaith moment from the stage, I felt confused in nurturing my child’s Muslim identity on the interfaith playground.

Not just confused, actually—afraid. Would he say Catholic prayers so many times that they felt more natural to him than Muslim prayers? Would he simply ignore me when I told him the Muslim story of Jesus? Around the time I was worrying about Catholic teaching, we got invited to the birthday party of Zayd’s Jewish friend Micah. It was at a petting zoo and there was plenty of Zayd’s favorite cake, but the thing that stuck with Zayd was that everyone kept saying, “Mazel tov.”

“Daddy, why do they keep saying that?” he asked. “What does it mean?”

“It means congratulations,” I told him. “People say that when something good happens to someone. Today is Micah’s birthday, so everyone is congratulating him.”

“Why don’t they just say ‘congratulations’ then?” He asked me.
“Well, they’re Jewish,” I said. “When something is a very special occasion, they want to say “Congratulations’ in their language.”

“Hmm,” Zayd said. “What will you say to me on my birthday?”

I was about to say the obvious, “Happy Birthday,” but something made me stop in my tracks. Zayd had heard “Happy Birthday” plenty of times before. That’s not the answer he was looking for and he hadn’t asked me to say “mazel tov” to him. He wanted to know if we had something like mazel tov, something distinct that we said to mark special occasions. He wanted the version of mazel tov that was his. “Mubaraki,” I told him. “I will say ‘mubaraki’ to you on your birthday!” I happily launched into a lecture on the term “mubaraki.” How it was from our holy language and it was our way of wishing someone a “very special congratulations.” Actually, mubaraki is the South Asian Hindi/Urdu derivation of the Arabic term Mabrook, but I decided on the shortcut explanation with Zayd.

This was a novel insight. My son’s encounters with other people’s religious language and stories actually made his own faith more relevant. Religion was not just something he did for a few moments before bed and meals, or for a few hours a week at religious education lessons, it was something all around him—at school and at Saturday morning birthday parties. The more he was around other people’s religions, the more he wanted to know about his own.

Every time Zayd came home with a story about Jesus or a Christian prayer, I sat down and taught him a story about Muhammad and a Sufi prayer. Zayd’s encounters with other religions gave me a reason to talk with him about his own. I tried to do it in a way that highlighted the shared moral lesson across both stories. In the Christian story of Jesus, he forgives the people who put him on the cross, returning kindness for hate. There is a similar story about the Prophet Muhammad. Every day he walks under a balcony in Mecca where a woman throws trash on him. The Prophet never gets angry with the woman, or even scolds her. One day, the Prophet realizes that there is no trash coming from the balcony. He looks up, and doesn’t see the woman. Instead of rejoicing over her absence, or even considering it an act of God that she didn’t show up, the Prophet becomes concerned about her health. After being told that she has indeed become very ill, the Prophet brings her water and prays for her recovery. “Like Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad always makes good choices,” I emphasized.

My mind started adapting my graduate school comparative religions charts for a toddler. They say “mazel tov,” and we say “mubaraki.” They have a name for and a description of God (the Lord, our Father), and we have a name for and a description of God (Allah the Creator). They have a Jesus story (the Son who died on the cross), we have a Jesus story (the Son who brought and embodied God’s message of love and forgiveness). They have Catholic saints, and we have Shia Imams. They have hymns, and we have Ismaili ginans. There’s the category of things every religion shares—thanking God before meals and bedtime is important. There’s the category of things we share with Jews—we don’t eat pork, and we pray in a language other than English. There’s the category of things we share with Christians—Jesus always makes good choices. There’s the category we share specifically with Christians who are Catholics—incense means something holy is about to happen.

The late writer David Foster Wallace opened his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College with the story of two young fish swimming by an older one, who nods and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?”¹ The fish swim on for a bit, and after a while one turns to the other and says, “What the hell is water?”¹
Wallace uses the story as a meditation upon the importance of awareness, but I can’t help but see it as a metaphor for the consequences of being immersed in a monoculture. The problem with only knowing a single culture or ecology is not only that you don’t know others, it’s that you don’t really know your own. Not, at least, in the way we moderns understand what it means “to know” something. Those fish were perfectly comfortable in the water—they could swim, they could breathe, and they could eat. But when they were asked to explain, they lacked the language, even for a fellow fish, even for themselves. And when the young fish realize this, they find themselves a little bit upset.

Imagine these young fish swimming back to the older fish who posed the question and saying, “Since you know so much, Jack, tell us about this thing called water.” The older fish begins with the chemical equation—water is H2O. No traction with that. He tries describing the key properties of water. “It’s, well, wet,” he tells them. No response. They’ve never known anything but wet. So he begins to explain by way of comparison. He tells tales of the sky and the land, the fabulous creatures that fill both. He speaks of legs for running, wings for flying, points out the fins the young fish have and says this is their version.

He continues, but the young fish are elsewhere now, in their own heads. They have gone from, “What the hell is water?” to, “What does running feel like? Or flying?” Next to, “Why was I cursed with fins instead of blessed with wings?” Then to, “What the hell will I do if I ever meet one of them?” Finally, one turns to the other and says, “Have those other places, those other creatures, always existed? Why did it take the old fish so long to tell us about them? What were they scared of?”

James Baldwin tells the story of finishing a book in a Swiss village in the middle of the 20th century. Walking through the town square one afternoon, answering the questions of little Swiss children who are feeling his hair, asking him what he eats, if he sleeps at night, he has a sudden realization: he is not simply the only black person in this village. He is the only black person these villagers have ever seen. He ends the essay with the line, “The world, once white, is white no more, and will never be white again.”

Those people were going to have to come to an understanding of who they were in a world where at least one person was not like them. It’s the single fact that, according to Anthony Giddens, makes the modern world so complex: when you encounter a pattern of life different than your own, you have to ask the question, “Why do I do what I do?”

It’s precisely the situation that the two rabbis in Chaim Potok’s Book of Lights find themselves in. On a trip to Japan, while observing the rituals of a Shinto priest, one rabbi looks at the other and says, “Is God listening to this? If not, why not? If so, what are we about?”

For Zayd, and for most of us, there is no pre-Baldwin Swiss village—no island, no retreat, no bubble—to protect us from the jazz and war of the world. The question is: how do parents and religious communities make this an asset in faith formation rather than a barrier? To realize that it is the jazz and war of the world that our faiths are for.

It wasn’t just Catholics and Jews that Zayd interacted with. Our neighbors next door are secular Hindus, and their five-year-old Tarun is Zayd’s best friend. He was uncharacteristically quiet for most of the Diwali party they hosted in 2012. But when the food came, he suggested something to his friend, “Tarun, you should say Shukrun Lillah before you eat.”
At first, this made me pretty happy. “He remembers a Muslim prayer,” I thought to myself. “And he’s willing to say it, even though it’s outside of our house and his Muslim religious education lessons.”

My thoughts were interrupted by Zayd’s rising voice. He was insisting, at the top of his lungs, that Tarun say Shukrun Lillah. Tarun knew how to play this game. He smiled sweetly, with “toddler intent” to get under his friend’s skin, and shook his head, “no,” as if denying Zayd a toy that he wanted to play with. This, of course, just made Zayd fill his lungs with a new whoosh of air and push the command out at an even higher volume, “YOU HAVE TO SAY SHUKRUN LILLAH BEFORE YOU EAT!”

I swear Tarun’s parents shot Shehnaz and me a look which said, “We thought you weren’t *those* kind of Muslims.” Shehnaz shot me a look, which very clearly said, “You’re the religion guy—you take care of this. I made the cupcakes.”

Zayd was crying now, alternately asking aloud, “Why won’t Tarun say Shukrun Lillah?” and demanding, “Tarun, you have to say Shukrun Lillah.” He got up and started towards Tarun, who was still smiling sweetly, keeping his toy away. “Uh oh, this is not good,” I thought to myself. Zayd was going through a hitting phase. His friend at school had recently gotten hit with a marker on the forehead. “Why’d you hit Ignacio?” I asked him. “Because he was running faster than me in the race,” he told me. I saw that look in Zayd’s eyes. I put my food down and took off, intercepting Zayd a few steps from Tarun. I picked him up in my arms and blurted out the first thing that came to my mind: “Tarun doesn’t have to say Shukrun Lillah, love. We say Shukrun Lillah for Tarun. I want you to go back to your plate and close your eyes and think of your food and Tarun and everything and everybody you love and say Shukrun Lillah—you’re thanking God for all of it. How does that sound?”

Zayd, remarkably, thought it sounded good. He wiped away a tear and nodded his head. I turned to Tarun, who had calmly gone back to his food. He nodded too. It was okay with him if he was included in Zayd’s prayers. My wife gave me a “not bad” look.

It wasn’t until later that night once the party was over, and the kids were in bed, that I had a small space to reflect on the day. I realized I might have stumbled onto something very important. In a world of lots of different people and prayers, of religious narratives that intersect here, diverge there, oppose elsewhere, perhaps the most important and relevant lesson we teach our religious children in a world of religious diversity is this: your religion is even more relevant in this cacophonous world; it means you are concerned for and take care of your friends from all religions.

Perhaps this is the lesson that Jesus teaches in Luke 10:25–37. It is a story familiar to nearly every Christian, and most non-Christians as well. A lawyer asks Jesus the question, “Teacher, how shall I gain eternal life?” Jesus suggests the man answer his own question, based on his knowledge of the holy law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind (Deuteronomy 6:5), and your neighbor as yourself ” (Leviticus 19:18), the lawyer dutifully replies.

But then—“desiring to justify himself,” the scripture says—the lawyer presents Jesus with a more complex matter: “Who is my neighbor?” In response, Jesus tells a story.
A man traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is set upon by robbers and left for dead. A priest walks the road and sees the man and passes to the other side, willfully ignoring him. A levite does the same. Along comes a traveler, a certain samaritan, who Jesus says is moved by compassion. He approaches the man, dresses his wounds with oil and wine, places him on his animal, brings him to an inn, spends the evening caring for him. The next morning, he gives the innkeeper two coins and clear instructions that this man is to be nursed back to full health and that he will pay the additional cost, whatever it may be.

“Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?” Jesus asks the lawyer.

“He who showed mercy on him,” the lawyer responds.

“Go and do likewise,” says Jesus.

There are many interpretations of this story. Augustine and other early Church scholars viewed it as an allegory of Adam’s journey from Paradise (Jerusalem) to the world (Jericho). The priest represents the law, the levite represents the prophets, and the samaritan is Jesus, come in the stranger’s guise. Martin Luther King Jr. and the founders of liberation theology emphasized the social justice dimensions of the story. King wrote, “One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on “life’s highway.”

But from where I sit, a somewhat different emphasis comes to mind. I imagine Jesus telling this parable about a man from the other community—the despised community—to a large gathering of his main audience—Jews. As Jesus proceeds, describing the brutal robbery, the two men who see and ignore the traveler, and finally the Samaritan who nurses him back to health, I imagine the series of realizations, the layers of understanding occurring in the minds of this audience.

Clearly, helping those in need is an important part of this story. Well, why don’t the priest and the levite—both important positions in the community of Jews—stop to help? They were both aware of the law. In fact, they were experts in the law, and had responsibility for interpreting and implementing it. Perhaps it was their very expertise that prevented them from helping. One of the laws forbade the touching of the dead, another forbade them from touching gentiles. Perhaps the priest and the levite feared the man dead, or thought he was a gentile, and chose to follow the letter of the law so that they would not become unclean. Clearly, Jesus is saying there is a good higher than following the letter of the law—the ethic of helping one in need. But if that were indeed the main point of the story, why didn’t the priest or the levite choose to override the letter of the law in the spirit of the higher good? Certainly that would have brought home the holiness of helping. Something else is happening here.

The priest and the levite only get three short sentences in the story. The scripture is not about them. The man who is hurt is also barely described at all. It is the Samaritan who gets all the attention. His actions are described in rich detail—using oil and wine (valuable resources) to dress the wounds, using his own animal to transport the man, spending his own time caring for him, offering the innkeeper whatever money was necessary to nurse him back to health.
Jesus is telling a story about people who were not part of his audience. In fact, he is making one the hero of his story. The Samaritans who were not just “other,” and not just despised, who were heretics, were people of a different faith.

When Jesus finishes, he turns to the man who asked, “Who is my neighbor?” and gently suggests he answer the question based on the story he just heard. The lawyer is unable to bring himself to speak of the man the way Jesus does, to say the word “Samaritan.” But he gets the point of the story: “He who showed mercy on him,” he tells the teacher. Jesus doesn’t force him further. He trusts the moral will work its way through the man’s prejudices. The story ends with Jesus telling the lawyer and the crowd that has gathered, “Go and do likewise.”

I imagine the question lingering, the stillness in the air, the sense of joy and fear and desire that this story has provoked in the audience. I imagine them nervously looking around at one another. No heretics here. No despised ones here. No “others” present. The Samaritans are safely elsewhere. I imagine the comfort this community felt being amidst their own as the story opened. And then slowly, as the story developed, as the priest and the levite and the samaritan were introduced and the action unfolded, a nagging discomfort creeping in. For eternal life to be gained, the presence of others is required. So much time has been spent building the life of this tribe. But for eternal life to be gained, the community has to expand.

It is a problem my children, and very likely yours, will not have. They encounter difference in their backyards, in their classrooms, and on their playgrounds. They already understand their community to be diverse. They have helped and been helped by those of different faiths and tribes—from the doctors and nurses who delivered them—from the very beginning. The question is, will they realize this?

I asked my friend April, “How many times did you hear the Good Samaritan story when you were growing up?”

“At a thousand,” she said.

I wrote about April in Acts of Faith. She was the first person hired at Interfaith Youth Core with our initial grant of $35,000. She has helped build the IFYC into a $4 million organization, running just about every one of our programs along the way, and launching half of them. She was raised a devout Evangelical Christian in rural Minnesota by a family who believed faith was about action. Her mother adopted children from, and out, of Christian conviction. April led not only Bible studies at church, but service and mission trips (abroad) throughout her high school years. “Jesus taught that you helped people, especially people different from you,” she told me. “That’s what the Good Samaritan story is all about.”

The turning point in April’s faith life came when she was president of the Christian Students Group at Carleton College. A mosque suffered an arson attack in nearby Minneapolis, and April received an email requesting that the religious leaders in the area support the Muslim community in its time of need. April instinctively shot back, “Yes.” When she brought the idea to the next meeting of the Carleton Christian group, some members had different instincts. A few suggested that this was a good time to proselytize to the Muslims whose prayer space had been destroyed. When April said she had already sent back an email saying she would help, and thought that turning service into evangelism was disingenuous, one person spoke up with indignity, “Those people aren’t Christian. They do not believe in Jesus Christ. They pray to a false God. If you help them, you are supporting devil worship.”
The problem is, those people had not just their instincts, they also had a very clear interpretation of scripture.

“While you were being barraged with all these biblical verses claiming you should hate people from other religions, why didn’t you just tell the story of the Good Samaritan?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just stayed silent. I let them ‘out-scripture’ me, even though I knew the text as well or better than any of them. I guess I just never thought about how those stories applied to people from different religions.”

Just as the civil rights movement and increased black-white interaction in the mid-twentieth century caused faith communities to articulate a theology of race relations, just as globalization spurred faith communities to articulate a theology of “the world church” or “the global ummah,” just as climate change has catalyzed articulation of theologies of environmentalism and “creation care,” the dynamic of increased interaction between people of different faith backgrounds should encourage religious communities to articulate theologies of interfaith cooperation.

By “theology,” I mean a coherent narrative that references key scripture, stories, history, heroes, poetry, etc. from the cumulative historical tradition of the faith community. By “articulate,” I mean to emphasize that all of our faith traditions already contain resources that speak to positive relations with the religious other. Our challenge is to make those pieces salient, to interpret and apply them to the contemporary dynamic of religious diversity, and to string them together in a coherent narrative. The result should be that young people, in their faith formation, get a clear sense that, “As a Christian/Muslim/Jew/Hindu, my faith teaches me to engage with people from other religions in ways that advance equal dignity and mutual loyalty.” In other words, in the future April will never feel “out-bibled” by those cherry picking verses that emphasize religion as a barrier or division.

There is a story of the Prophet Muhammad hosting a Christian delegation in Medina. The Muslims and Christians had a heated debate on the differences between their respective traditions. At one point, the Christians asked to leave the city so they could perform their prayers. The Prophet surprised them by inviting them to pray in his mosque, saying that just because their traditions had differences did not mean that they should not respect and show hospitality to the others’ practices.

This story of the Prophet highlights an important distinction. Namely, a theology of interfaith cooperation, as I describe it here, is not about religions being the same, or everyone going to heaven. A theology of interfaith cooperation does not state that we should not argue about deep cosmic differences. After all, in the story above, the Muslim hosts (led by the Prophet) were arguing with the Christian delegation about religion —perhaps about the different Muslim and Christian views of Jesus, perhaps about how Muslims viewed the Christian Bible (holy but incomplete). Theirs was not a facile, “You wash your hands before you pray, I wash mine, we’re all going to heaven,” exchange. Instead, the story shows that, despite important differences, the Muslims and Christians showed each other kindness, respect and hospitality. In other words, the theologies of interfaith cooperation I am most interested in are about building bridges between people of different faith perspectives on earth, not about which religious bridge leads to heaven.
“Mubaraki,” I said to Zayd on his fourth birthday. “Mubaraki,” I said again, this time with added fatherly emphasis. He smiled faintly at me, and then went back to eating pizza with his friends. I admit to feeling a little disappointment. The “Mazel Tov” moment had been such a big insight for me, but maybe for Zayd it amounted to one more interesting feature of the world.

Later that afternoon, when we were opening presents, I saw Zayd gravitate towards the ones that looked like they might have remote control cars inside. I snuck a package of what felt like books in front of him. Reluctantly, he opened it. One had an azure cover with the outline of a man riding a smiling horse flying through the night sky, *Muhammad* by Demi. Shehnaz and I smiled at each other.

“Zayd, look,” I said. “It’s a book about the Prophet Muhammad.” But Zayd was already tearing into the next package. I started flipping through it, and was struck by the beauty of the illustrations and the attention to detail.

I figured maybe one of his grandmothers, or an aunt, had given it to him. I opened the card. It was from Tarun.

“Zayd, Tarun gave this to you,” I said.


“He sure does,” I said.

All of the meal time prayers and bedtime stories about religion. All of the hours spent in religious education classes with his grandmother. Nothing seemed to interest Zayd in his own faith as much as the idea that his friend from a different faith respected it.

Sometimes you need to know a little about the sky to appreciate the ocean. Sometimes you need a bird to tell you that it’s cool to be a fish.

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