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Exploring Religion, Social Justice and the Common Good

BY SIDNEY SCHWARZ

For the past twenty-five years I have been professionally engaged, as a rabbi, an educator and an executive of two different communal organizations, in exploring the nexus between Judaism and justice. For the last thirteen years the programs and curricula of The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, which I founded, have reached well over 10,000 Jewish high school and college students. But nothing that I have done has been as rewarding in terms of both outcomes and learnings as the E Pluribus Unum Project, an interfaith program exploring religion, social justice and the common good that was launched in 1997.

E Pluribus Unum

The EPU Project emerged from three distinct but interrelated obser-

ations. As a rabbi, I came to realize how easily religion loses its way. By tending to focus on the customs, ceremonies and forms that give institutional religion continuity rather than the ethical *raison d'être* of their respective faith tradition, many people of conscience turn away from organized religion. I found that many people doing the most important God-work in the world won't ever set foot in a church, mosque or a synagogue. We are looking for God in all the wrong places.

As one committed to social change, I became discouraged when others engaged in political and social change work were dismissive of religion and spirituality. Given how challenging and difficult such work can be, I observed that those who stay with it were sustained by a deep faith that comes from another dimension of reality, from a transcendent source.

Sidney Schwarz is the founder of the E Pluribus Unum Project and founder and president of The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values. He is the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Rockville, MD, and author of *Finding A Spiritual Home: How A New Generation of American Jews Can Transform the Synagogue*.

To be able to access that source requires an openness of the spirit to alternate ways of seeing a hard world.

As an educator of young people I experienced how successfully Jewish texts and values could be used to inspire greater commitment to issues of social justice and political activism. I was eager to explore whether the same approach could be used successfully by other faith traditions. Given how much energy for community service and social change emanates from the religious communities of America, it seemed only natural to explore ways that a diverse group of young people could be motivated to pursue the common good in a setting where the primary learning rubric was the religious social teachings of the respective faiths.

Religions as Sources of Ethics and Values

When the EPU Project was launched in 1997 with initial funding from the Lilly Endowment and subsequent funding from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Person's Foundation and from the Ford Foundation, the expressed objectives were:

- To raise students' awareness of their respective religious traditions as a source of ethics and values that have direct bearing on a variety of major issues confronting our society today;
- To allow students to explore both the similarities and differences between their respective faith traditions and discover those areas of common

interest which might form the basis for a stronger civic fabric in America;

- To help students understand that a democracy rewards those who are most informed and active on issues, and specifically to teach how students can become more effective advocates for responsible social and political change informed by the teachings of religion.

Four discrete strands of the EPU program — the academic track, spiritual arts and worship, volunteer service and advocacy and community building — were designed to maximize the chance that participants would come to see the connection between their respective faith traditions and the need for any practice of that faith tradition to be in the service of some greater social good.

A Model Program

In the original design of the three-week EPU program for entering college freshmen, each morning the sixty participants were divided by faith group into three faith-alike classes with a faculty member expert in that tradition. Three topical areas — human rights, poverty and the environment — served as the themes for each of the respective weeks. Policy experts would be invited to address the entire community in a plenary session, grounding the students in the specifics of the given issue. Each faculty member had a good deal of autonomy to determine how best to introduce the students to the particu-

lar teachings of that faith tradition as it pertained to the particular policy theme of the week. Every few days, students gathered together to participate in educational exercises which challenged them to learn, compare and contrast the teachings of their own faith tradition with those of the other two traditions.

One of the most surprising findings over the course of the three years was how little most students knew about the social application of their respective faith traditions — despite the fact that the recruitment process brought to the program young people who were far more connected to their religion than the average young adult. This suggested to the project organizers that none of the three faith communities was particularly effective at conveying the social message of their respective traditions.

In an evaluation administered prior to the start of the program, fewer than two-thirds of participants could name even three teachings from their own faith tradition that spoke to any social issue. Over 95% could answer that question by the end of the program. It was less surprising that fewer than a third of participants could cite three religious social teachings of faiths other than their own on the intake interviews. That number rose to over 80% by the end of the program. There was considerable evidence that the EPU educational environment helped students find their voice in relating religious teachings to pressing social issues of the day.

Interfaith Exposure and Religious Identity

A somewhat counter-intuitive finding had to do with the relationship between commitment to faith and the ability of participants fully to engage with others who did not share their religious heritage.

From its inception, one of the commitments of the program design was that we would not sacrifice the passionate embrace of one's own faith tradition in the process of creating an environment that encouraged pluralistic expressions of faith, ethnicity and ideology. We were committed to avoiding this common pitfall of so many well-intentioned interfaith programs. The organizers were not unaware of the peculiar brand of intolerance born out of religious passion and fervor. Yet we believed that before participants engaged in any interfaith approach to pursue the common good, they would need to be grounded in the social teachings of their own respective faith traditions.

Not only did our program design abide by this principle, but in a six-month follow up study of alumni, we found that those most grounded in their own tradition were able to create the strongest relationships with people of other faith traditions in the pursuit of some social justice cause. Essentially, they were more inclined to look to religious cohorts for allies because their experience of faith through EPU bore witness to the relationship between religion and social justice.

It is not that the EPU experience avoided challenging each participants' understanding of one's own religious tradition and that of others; it was programmed to do so. In some cases, the expression of a viewpoint from one faith tradition helped a fellow EPU participant understand or articulate a belief or position from his/her own tradition for the first time. This phenomenon tended to strengthen commitment to one's own faith. At other times, however, the array of ideas about faith and religion from so many different perspectives challenged deeply held views and beliefs. One participant wrote: "I am flooded with new ideas and not sure where I stand with my own (faith) anymore."

While participants may have at times found themselves confused, the faculty was confident that it was the kind of confusion that would help them grow, both in faith and in maturity. The challenge articulated to the participants was to be able to stand in one's own truth while simultaneously being able to acknowledge the truth of another. Clearly, it was the focus on the theme of social justice that got participants to look past the particular elements of their respective faith traditions and encouraged them to engage in boundary crossing to find common ethical elements among all traditions.

Long Term Impact

With the benefit of a grant from the Ford Foundation, we had the abil-

ity to monitor the effect of the EPU program on our alumni over a two year period.

College sophomores reported that in the year following their initial EPU experience they found that a major shift in their religious self-perception had taken place. They found that they now framed their statements of belief and commitment from a much deeper place within themselves, coming to feel that they more fully owned their convictions of faith. They had moved decisively beyond the stage of repeating what they learned from their parents and teachers. They largely attributed this self-conscious internalizing of deeply felt life commitments to EPU. The group, as a whole, and the individuals that were part of it, were solidly reflective of James Fowler's "individuated/reflective" faith stage, characterized by an ability to live with religious doubts (see James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Harper-Collins, 1981). A dance faculty member invoked a West African proverb to describe the kind of spiritual learning that was engendered at EPU — "the opposite of truth is not falsehood, but another profound truth."

"Justice, Justice . . ."

Alumni also more fully embraced the "servant leader" ethic that the EPU model promoted. One student said, "we all discovered that the idea of working for the community and (for) the common good and going

out and making a difference is something that is common in all our religions. . . . Before last summer I'd have been against working collaboratively (with people of other faiths). I would have only worked to support (my religion's) organizations."

A second student said, "Something I got out of EPU last year is looking at the religious texts from our various backgrounds and what our faith in general has to say about the quest for social justice. When you realize that they are so similar . . . you realize how much bigger a group of people from different faith backgrounds you have to work with for the common good. It is a very empowering thing."

In several EPU reunions held during the winter of 2000 this theme recurred with significant regularity. Even as these alumni bemoaned the fact that they could not devote as much time to community service and social justice causes as they would have liked, (owing to their commitment to their undergraduate regimen) virtually all reported on the impact of the EPU experience on their thinking. Some had changed their majors, some had developed new ideas about career goals. All had been challenged to reassess the way that they thought about religion, social justice and the common good.

Next Steps

As we consider the impact of the EPU Project on the thinking and behavior of 160 young people, all of

whom are now moving through their college careers with varying relationships with churches, synagogues and the communities in which they find themselves, we are given pause to consider the ways in which EPU's unique configuration of themes and disciplines might benefit other fields.

The next phase of the EPU Project was launched during the summer of 2000. Some 50 nationally prominent professionals from the fields of religion, education, social change and the arts were brought together with a handful of EPU alumni and faculty. The purposes was two-fold. First, we wanted to describe and demonstrate the unique EPU programmatic model to individuals who were positioned to incorporate elements into their respective institutions. Second, we structured the program so as to encourage the launching of several new projects which would extend the EPU vision into new settings. Among the most exciting of these is a projected interfaith service house in which recent college graduates would live, engage in study and spiritual practice and work in social justice related organizations for a year. Several other, similarly ambitious projects are in earlier stages of development.

However rewarding and rich the EPU experience has been for those who have lived it, it is clear that we are only scratching the surface of the impact that religion can have on the pursuit of the common good. Indeed, every question that gets answered generates two new questions. The

questions that we intend to pose at our future professional consultations include: To the extent that higher education is concerned about character education, can colleges and universities afford not to integrate the social teachings of the world's historic religions? To the extent that social change organizations seek to provide impetus to and support for people who are committed to the work of peace and justice, how might they marshal the support of religious social teachings?

Last, but perhaps most importantly, given the galvanizing impact of exploring the social teachings of one's own and other faith traditions, how might churches, synagogues, seminaries and parochial schools re-

assess the way that they teach religion? Might it be that the most compelling aspects of each of our faith traditions lie precisely at the intersection between faith and the common good? Is not the purpose of religion to help people tread the very narrow ridge between attention to one's own needs and self-interest, and devoting energies to the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves? Must not religion serve both as a balm for the afflicted soul as well as a spur to the complacent conscience?

These are the kind of questions that EPU poses. It is in our response to these and other questions that we might find some important answers for creating a more just and peaceful world.