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Engaging Religious Diversity on Campus: The Role of Interfaith Leadership

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Abstract

This article explores the idea of interfaith leadership and the role that it might play to build religious pluralism on college and university campuses. It considers two stories of religious diversity in America: one where leadership contributed to religious conflict and one where it mediated potential religious conflict. Through these stories, the authors offer a definition for interfaith leadership and suggest ways that universities can nurture students as interfaith leaders given the particular landscape of religious diversity in America.

Muslim and Christian students of Egyptian descent suddenly no longer sit together during lunch at Dickinson High School on Palisade Avenue.

(Elliot, 2005)

In December 2004, Jersey City looked much like any other American city with a large immigrant population. Though Christians and Muslims often lived in tension in Egypt, Egyptian immigrants living in their new American home found community through a shared language and common heritage. Muslims shopped at Christian grocery stores, and Christians went to Muslim doctors. Their children went to school and played soccer together. Older men of both communities gathered together in local cafes for chatter and chess games. Both communities experienced prosperity and opportunity.

Then a family of Egyptian Christians—including an eight year old girl—were brutally murdered. With no official word from authorities on who might be guilty, the community erupted.

"I'm not going to be friends with Muslims anymore—their parents killed my best friend," said a 17-year-old boy who attends Dickinson High School, his eyes welling with tears.

"Why are they blaming the Muslims?" asked a 15-year-old student from Pakistan, cloaked in a black hijab, as she briskly walked home from school Wednesday afternoon. "I feel scared." (Elliot, 2005)

Four months later, when two ex-convicts—neither Muslim nor Egyptian—were charged with the crime, sharp tensions continued to flare up within the community (Kelly, 2005). The damage had been done.

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Was it the crime alone, horrendous though it may be, that caused the community to abandon so quickly its new ties? We think it is more than just the crime—communities do not naturally come together or naturally break apart, but need instigators and catalysts to make that change happen. Shortly after the event, a local Egyptian Christian organization organized a gathering on the front steps of the slain family's church. They likened the crimes to terrorist executions and placed the blame squarely in the Muslim community before an audience of hundreds of community members and local media (Elliot, 2005). In a moment of tension and uncertainty, a voice stepped into the breach and proclaimed: this is a crime of one group against another, and this is a clash of Muslims against Christians. This naming is itself an act of leadership, and although it may not be the kind of leadership we would like to see, we cannot deny that the convener of the press conference was leading the Jersey City community. What is striking is how compelling and powerful this vision and leadership ended up being for the community.

What if, instead of naming the crime as a religiously motivated violence, the Christian leaders stood up and said, "Violence of this sort is neither Christian nor Muslim. As Christians, we stand in community with all our neighbors—whether Christian or Muslim, Jewish or secular—and mourn this crime as a community." What if the Muslim leaders had made an equally compelling case, condemning such acts of violence as anathema to Islam? It is worth noting that these voices did, in fact, step up, but that the voices that ultimately swayed the community were those of division and conflict (Kelly, 2005). We find it tragically predictable that the most immediate, most articulate and most vocal leader was the one shouting the tired refrain of a clash of civilizations.

As the Max DePree line goes, "the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality" (DePree, 2004, p. 11). The refrain of clash is loud and clear not because it is the norm or inevitable, but because there are voices offering it as a compelling reading of this sort of incident. We urgently need a new kind of leader—leaders able to articulate a compelling vision of interfaith cooperation that can speak over the din of clash and conflict, and leaders with skills for bringing those of different religious and philosophical backgrounds together around a shared common good.

We believe that this kind of leadership is about more than just maintaining a fragile sense of tolerance, but of actually creating a cultural shift, so that interfaith cooperation is not an anomaly but becomes a social norm. Consider that about a hundred years ago, the term "environmentalist" meant very little. "Human rights activist" was a new idea fifty years ago. Now these are clear identity categories that carry expectations for behavior and action. Recycling is a social norm with a leadership category of "environmentalist" attached to it. We believe that a network of compelling, articulate interfaith leaders could make interfaith cooperation a social norm, with clear expectations for behavior and action.

Colleges and universities have the potential to play a vanguard role in creating this social norm, nurturing a generation of interfaith leaders who will then take this framework into their careers and lives beyond college. As a campus shapes interfaith leaders, those leaders in turn will reinforce and transform their campuses for sustained interfaith cooperation. Most campuses take seriously the need to educate students who are able to engage constructively with global issues. As one of the authors of this article has written in a previous issue of this journal, the way that campuses address issues like race and multiculturalism can provide a model for how campuses can engage "religious diversity in a way that impacts individual campuses, the broader system of higher education, the country we live in and perhaps even the world" (Patel, 2007, p. 5). We turn now to a case of positive interfaith leadership on a campus in America, and use this example to explore the urgency for interfaith leadership in America. We will also define what interfaith

leadership looks like for college students and suggest ways that colleges and universities can nurture students as interfaith leaders.

A Story of Interfaith Leadership: Stanford University

Earlier this fall, during the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*, a *Sukkah* (ritual shelter) in front of the Stanford University Hillel house was vandalized with spray painted graffiti. The vandals also toppled a sign that stood in front of the *Sukkah*: “Come in. Hang out. It’s Sukkot. Everyone’s welcome” (Gettinger, 2009).

On many campuses, this incident would have led to immediate conflict down the usual religious divides. But several high level administrators, including the university president came out quickly with statements condemning the vandalism. Students spoke out as well: the president of the Jewish Students Association wrote an op-ed in the Stanford student paper inviting the entire campus community to a service and shared meal in the *Sukkah* (Gettinger, 2009; Messenger, 2009). Furthermore, Stanford has shown a deep commitment to religious pluralism since its inception with a non-denominational chapel open to all religious traditions, dedicated religious life staff of several religious backgrounds, and an intensive interfaith leadership fellowship, the Fellowship for Religious Encounter.

Just a few days before the incident, Anand Venkatkrishnan, a Hindu, and Ansaf Kareem, a Muslim, had started a new interfaith organization on campus, Faiths Acting in Togetherness and Hope (F.A.I.T.H.), with the intention of bringing interfaith cooperation to a broader swath of the Stanford community (Unterreiner, 2009).² The goal of F.A.I.T.H. is to build upon existing institutional support for interfaith cooperation while bringing in groups and communities that might not typically have been invested in interfaith work. Anand and Ansaf were amongst the first to respond to the incident, with Anand sending out a letter entitled “Sukkot Vandalism: Our Responsibility,” to student leaders of various student groups and several high-level campus administrators:

This morning I read of the vandalism that occurred on the *sukkah* erected outside Hillel for this week's observance of Sukkot, and I was afraid. I was afraid that the act was knowing, egregious, personal. I was afraid of the potential for mistrust, for retreat and separation. I was afraid because I am directly affected.

While it may have been less an act of virulent anti-Semitism than the result of a drunken night, the vandalism of a holy structure is unacceptable to me as a person of faith. And it is not only the temple that demands my care and attention. I am personally hurt when mosques are razed, churches are burned, synagogues are broken. I feel the violation of their communities as deeply as my own. I cannot stand silently when the sanctity of another is at stake.

The duty of an interfaith leader is not only to condemn an attack on another, but to prevent it from occurring. This is a work for which each of us have a responsibility. . . . I am committed this year to helping build that beloved community through Stanford F.A.I.T.H, but I hope many of you will, *today*, articulate to your own communities why such an act of vandalism is an affront to us all: Christian and Muslim, Jew and Hindu, and non-believer. . . . (A. Venkatkrishnan, email correspondence, October 4, 2009)

² We should note that both Anand and Ansaf are members of Interfaith Youth Core’s Fellows Alliance, a select group of young leaders on campuses around the country who are trained, nurtured and networked by IFYC staff.

Anand's vision, bolstered by a long-term institutional commitment, shows the potential of students to reshape the dominant narrative of interreligious encounter, and to be supported in this leadership by their university.

Defining Interfaith Leadership

In the same way we ask how some leaders can stoke conflict in their communities, we also look to Stanford to understand how an interfaith leader does something different with a situation of potential conflict. We suggest three ways to think about what we can expect an interfaith leader to do. First, interfaith leaders change the conversation about the role religion plays in our society. Interfaith leaders know how to shift the discourse from clash to cooperation, from mere tolerance to real relationships. They are fluent in what their tradition and the traditions of others have to say about working with people who are different from them. Second, interfaith leaders start projects that put this idea of common action into reality. They are organizers, particularly equipped with skills of bringing people of different faiths together. Finally, interfaith leaders transform environments. An interfaith leader looks at her community and wonders how the vision she has can become institutionalized; she asks about the sustainability of cooperative efforts and shifts the patterns of interaction so that a community has long term bolstering that may prevent future conflicts. Interfaith leaders understand the idea of cooperation becoming a social norm, and see their actions as steps in achieving that norm.

Anand's response—*it is my duty as a person of faith to protect the rights of others*—helped to define reality in terms of solidarity and support in a time of conflict, insisting that an affront to one religious tradition is an affront to all. Anand spoke into a moment of potential conflict with a new vision, able to articulate proactively for other community leaders. He gave his fellow students a clear call to action, inviting them to speak out to their own religious communities.

Often the college students with whom we work already understand the vision Anand articulates, but are unsure how to articulate it. They have a deep feeling that people of different faiths should be able to work together, often based on relationships and encounters of religious diversity that would not have existed even a generation before. A Catholic student in one of our classes grew up playing Sega Genesis in the basement of his North Dakota home with the one Muslim boy in his entire school; one of our summer interns, a reform Jew, spent her first year of college rooming with an Indian Hindu. These stories are common for students, but they often do not know how to translate these stories into a vision for their communities. Interfaith leadership is about harnessing these stories for a vision of religious pluralism.

Interfaith leaders must be fluent in the stories from their own traditions that call them to religious pluralism as well as the tradition of others. In another point of his letter, Anand points to the example of German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's efforts to save Jews in Nazi Germany to explain why all people of faith should protect one another's rights. Anand also locates his call to action within a broader narrative by alluding to President Obama's inauguration speech. As such, Anand's call to action is not just about religious duty, but also about valuing America's "patchwork heritage" (Obama, 2009). Interfaith leaders change the conversation, turning conflict into an opportunity for common action, rooted in particular and shared narratives.

The second thing that interfaith leaders do is organize projects and opportunities for common interfaith action. Anand gave his community a concrete way to respond to the incident, inviting all to get involved in F.A.I.T.H.; immediately following the event, he and Ansaf announced plans for a day of interfaith service to demonstrate the ways that people of faith can work together on an issue that matters to the Stanford community. Interfaith leaders must be equipped with the actual ability to transform their vision into a reality, having concrete skills of

organizing, and an ability to navigate the realities of different religious communities' needs and expectations. Whether projects are of a local nature, such as working together in a soup kitchen or long-term tackling of homelessness and hunger in a community, or whether they be global, catalyzing faith communities around eradicating deaths due to malaria or ending climate change, interfaith leaders need the skills of organizing and relationship building. They must be able to make the vision of interfaith cooperation a concrete reality.

The final thing we can expect interfaith leaders to do is transform their environments. Often the most concrete way that this happens for the students we work with is by helping them think about how they can make their campuses sustainably committed to religious pluralism. Students we have worked with have done everything from establishing new interfaith student councils, to creating academic requirements for studying other religions, to ensuring the accessibility to Halal and Kosher food in dining halls. From this sense of immediate accomplishment, and the realization that they have the ability to shape future students' experience of religious diversity, they develop what we hope will become a lifelong commitment to interfaith cooperation. This commitment might be explicit in the careers they choose—as religious leaders or community interfaith activists—or more implicit, informing their future work as educators, policy makers, or civic leaders, for example. It is yet to be seen the ways that Anand and Ansaif will transform their communities in the long term, although it seems safe to suggest that the work they are pursuing finds itself in a hospitable atmosphere at Stanford in particular.

The relationship between students as interfaith leaders and the colleges and universities that nurture them can become mutually reinforcing. The leadership that Anand demonstrated is about both his character as an individual and the structures of support in place at Stanford institutionally. Positive campus engagement of religious diversity will allow students to flourish fully in their identities, create campuses better equipped to deal with crises of religious conflict, and strengthen a campus's overall social capital. Students who are empowered to envision what campus transformation might look like not only have an immediate impact on their campus, but make their campus more appealing for religiously diverse potential students.

Fostering Interfaith Leadership on Campus

American universities have a particular role to play supporting students as interfaith leaders in an era of global religious conflict. As Harvard Professor Diana Eck explains, America is the most religiously diverse country in the world, and the most religiously devout nation in the West (Eck, 2001). Depending on how you count the numbers, between 70-80% of Americans identify as religious or spiritual, and communities around the country are dealing with new challenges of interaction across religious difference (Keysar, 2009; Pew Forum, 2008). The significance of American religious diversity for public life was evident in the heated discussion about religious affiliation during the 2008 presidential campaign, including the scrutiny of Governor Sarah Palin's Pentecostal faith, the confusion of what the GOP ought to do with a Mormon candidate in Governor Mitt Romney, and the endless "accusations" of then candidate Barack Obama's "Muslim" identity. Even rural communities that we would expect to remain sheltered from the religious diversity of big cities are dealing with new issues of interreligious interaction. As a microcosm of America's diversity, campuses experience this interaction within a concentrated and potentially volatile environment.

America is experiencing unprecedented interreligious interaction, underscored by the reality that we are living in an era of religious conflict. Globally, we see a mix of diversity and devotion, juxtaposed against people killing each other to the soundtrack of prayer. Gone is the inevitability of a simplified secularization thesis, replaced with an assumption of a seemingly inevitable clash of civilizations. Through this lens, the story of conflict in Jersey City becomes

just another example of this inevitability. One reading of the story seems to say that we are lucky enough when different religions can get along in America, but we should expect that eventually things will go wrong. We will eventually see, whether small or large scale, the clash take place on American soil.

A more optimistic lens, however, sees America as an opportunity for building something better, transforming the fragility of a diverse community into long term stability based on mutual trust and a commitment to a common good. We call this opportunity religious pluralism (Eck, n.d.). Religious diversity is a descriptive fact, and is not in and of itself a good, although we often talk about it as though it is. To say, “Stanford University is religiously diverse,” or “Jersey City is religiously diverse,” does not tell us anything about how the people of those diverse identities are interacting. A religiously diverse campus could be the site of religiously motivated bigotry and vandalism, or it could be a space where people of all religious identity, and no religious identity at all, flourish, a space marked by interfaith initiatives around the common good and robust interfaith dialogue.

Taking a longer view, interfaith leadership and religious pluralism are not just about the mediating of potential religious conflict, but also about creating a stronger civic fabric in general. We draw here on the work of Robert Putnam, recognizing that religious communities, groups, and organizations have a particularly powerful sort of social capital. While Putnam warns that unengaged diversity leads to a decline in trust, community, and overall social capital, when that diversity is engaged by forming intentional networks across lines of difference, the long term benefit is strong, stable, and engaged societies (Putnam, 2007).

Interfaith leadership, then, is about changing a situation of unengaged religious diversity or outright religious conflict into religious pluralism, both for immediate and long term benefits. Universities are the places where young people are often most starkly confronted with the fact of religious diversity, and as such have a particular interest in shaping students to respond positively to that diversity. When students go away to college, it is often the first time that they are choosing their religious identities on their own, making the decision to practice or not practice without dictation from their families and home communities. Many have not had serious or sustained relationships with those of a different faith or philosophical background; those who may not have had those relationships in a space where they are actively encouraged to think critically about issues of their own identity and how that identity relates to others. All of this interaction, engagement, and exploration take place in an often relatively insular environment. The potential for volatility and clash across religious lines is obvious.

That said, college and university campuses have been at the vanguard for many social movements and therefore have particular expertise in shaping students, communities, and the broader culture about these issues. Movements like the gay rights movement, the service-learning movement, and the multi-cultural/diversity movements have gained much of their ground and momentum at colleges and universities, supported by curricula and classroom work, academic research, student life initiatives, as well as institutional financial resources. A commitment to nurturing students for leadership in a religiously diverse world would have implications for courses and academic concentrations—students, for example, would be able to choose a minor with a cross-disciplinary focus on interfaith studies. Incoming students would receive programming around religious diversity as a part of their orientation diversity programming, and residence advisors would receive training in religious diversity. In the same way that many universities today make a commitment through their mission statements and strategic plans to environmental sustainability or racial diversity, universities would articulate religious pluralism as central to their fundamental purpose. Resources would be invested to support staff dedicated to making religious pluralism a reality, whether it be through religious life, multi-cultural/diversity affairs, service learning, or student affairs. Responding to the reality of their

students' encounters with religious diversity, universities would actively prepare students to take leadership around this movement.

We close with words from Stanford Dean of Religious Life, Reverend Scotty McLennan, "We at Stanford are primarily training our students to be global citizens and leaders for the 21st century, and a critical part of this is interfaith literacy, understanding and leadership." For McLennan, that this training means more than just having a strong Office of Religious Life, and a strong academic Religious Studies Department, but "clear understanding and commitment from the top to include religion in our conception of multiculturalism" (McLennan, email correspondence, November 6, 2009). It is unsurprising that with a commitment like this, leaders like Ansaf and Anand are able to flourish and contribute to the vision of a pluralistic campus. Our hope is that if more and more campuses might take this seriously, interfaith cooperation will become the norm and not just an anomaly, not just on campus but also in the broader society.

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