

The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities¹

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Abstract

As tensions around religious diversity escalate in America, there is an increased realization that interfaith cooperation has broad civic relevance. In this realization, there is an opportunity for American colleges and universities to play a leadership role in constructively engaging religious diversity. The authors of this article explore the current challenges posed by religious diversity, a model of interfaith cooperation focused on civic engagement and social cohesion. They also explore how college students have a particular leadership role to play in building interfaith cooperation.

In his inaugural speech, President Obama reminded the country that

We know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and nonbelievers. . . . We cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace. (Obama, 2009)

We are struck that the first African American president, when focusing on diversity and America's peace-building role in a diverse world, chose to highlight not America's racial or ethnic diversity, but her religious diversity.

This attention to religious diversity is echoed further in the recommendations of the Advisory Council of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.³ In those recommendations, there is a clear connection between the ways people of different faiths might work together to serve their communities toward a concrete civic good sought by the United States government. Not only that, but also colleges and universities are identified in the report as vanguard institutions for building interfaith cooperation (President's Advisory Council, 2010).

As we will explore in this article, the way that a country, community, or campus engages its diversity—ethnic, racial, religious—has a significant effect on whether that diversity leads toward cooperation or conflict. This summer was an illustration of a move toward intolerance in American

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³ Patel sat on the Advisory Council.

political discourse and public life with the uproar around the “Ground Zero Mosque,” protest toward Muslim groups around the country, an angry spate of openly anti-Muslim campaign ads, and an aborted Qur’an burning that riveted the world. As this rhetoric escalated, we also saw major public figures like Mayor Bloomberg of New York speak out about the incompatibility of such intolerance to the American project of pluralism and of the civic relevance of engaging diversity constructively.

Diversity left unattended, we will argue, can lead to tensions, intolerance, and outright conflict; diversity positively engaged can build social cohesion and social capital. For many years, interfaith engagement and dialogue were seen primarily as an opportunity reserved for small groups of people to build deep relationships through intensive conversation. Now, we see interfaith cooperation shifting to become a civic imperative and a public good. In other words, interfaith cooperation is going from a niche activity for a small group of enthusiasts to a social norm integral to the most religiously diverse society in the world. Within this shift, we see an important opportunity for colleges and universities, and the student leaders that they nurture, to pursue this public good actively and in doing so shift the way our country engages with its religious diversity.

America’s Religious Diversity

America is the most religiously diverse country in the world, and the most religiously devout country in the West (Eck, 2001). Over 80% of Americans consider themselves religious, and the diversity of those affiliations continues to grow (Pew, 2008). Although diversity is often taken to be a good in and of itself, Eck (2001) offers a caution that “diversity” is merely descriptive: It tells us the kinds of people in a given society, but it tells us nothing about how those people interact. Is there a sense of trust between diverse people and a shared commitment to the common good? Do they interact regularly with one another formally and informally? Or do they linger in a more superficial tolerance that may or may not be able to stand the challenge of real tension? Eck (n.d.) suggests a society should seek *pluralism*, the active engagement of diversity toward a common end. Our definition of interfaith cooperation in turn draws from this idea of pluralism and seeks to bring people of different faiths together in a way that respects different religious identities, builds mutually inspiring relationships, and engages in common action around issues of shared social concern (Patel & Meyer, 2010).

Further testing the assumption that diversity in and of itself is a good thing, sociologist of religion Robert Putnam has argued that diversity and what he calls “social capital” are in fact *inversely* related. That is, qualities like social cohesion, civic engagement, trust, and positive encounter decline starkly relative to the diversity of a community. Generally speaking, the more homogenous a community is, the higher its social capital; the more diverse, the lower its social capital (Putnam, 2007).

The recent public discourse around America’s religious diversity, particularly around the role of Muslims in American society, affirms that we cannot simply assume that diversity is a good in and of itself and that we have significant work to do to build social cohesion and social capital in the face of America’s growing religious diversity. W. E. B. Du Bois famously referred to the challenge of the 20th century as the challenge of the “Color Line” (Du Bois, 1906/1995, p. 42); the challenge of the 21st century may very well be the challenge of the faith line. This is not to say that racial tensions have been fully overcome or that religious identity is identical to racial identity. Instead, this is to point to the singular influence religious identity and diversity have in national and global affairs (Patel, 2007a). For a long time, the challenges of religious diversity were often thought to be an “over there problem,” something that troubled Belfast or Gaza, but not Murfreesboro, Tennessee, or Lower Manhattan. The challenges of religious diversity have come home.

The Challenges of Religious Diversity: Ignorance, Intolerance, Tension

Response to religious diversity, then, can tend in one of two directions: cooperation or conflict. Although America has seen little outright religious conflict, we identify three key trends—ignorance, intolerance, and conflict—by considering recent data on American attitudes and behaviors in the face of religious diversity.

Religious Ignorance

In a recent Pew (2010c) study on Americans' religious knowledge, the average American could correctly answer only 50% of 32 questions meant to test America's religious literacy. Stephen Prothero (2007) famously gave America an "F" on religion and suggests that religious illiteracy is one of the greatest challenges for contemporary civic life. Does religious ignorance, however, impact the ways that individuals of different faiths interact, or is it more benign than that?

Several studies strongly suggest the amount of knowledge one has about a religion corresponds strongly to positive attitudes toward that religion. For example, in 2007, 58% of Americans said they knew little or nothing about Islam; those who knew less about Islam were significantly more likely to have negative views of Islam or Muslims (Pew, 2007). Additionally, a recent study out of Ohio State University found that only 28% of Americans who believed false information about Islam were willing to reject that information when presented with accurate information, suggesting that religious misinformation may be particularly difficult to counter (Nisbet & Kelly, 2010). We find this especially concerning in a time when there's arguably an active market peddling such misinformation about Muslims; 48% of those who have negative views of Islam say they get their information about Muslims primarily from the media (Feldman, 2010; Moghul, 2010; Pew, 2007).

Religious Intolerance

Moving from knowledge to attitudes, data on American attitudes toward those of other faiths remain largely ambivalent. Pew (2008) finds a majority of Americans to be largely "non-dogmatic," with nearly 70% being open to wisdom and truth in other religious traditions, and Putnam and Campbell (2010) find 80% of Americans to be tolerant of a diversity of religious views. That said, in a recent Gallup (2010) poll, 52% of Americans said their view of Islam was unfavorable, and 43% of Americans admit to feeling prejudiced toward Muslims. A 2010 Pew report found that favorable opinions of Muslims had decreased between 2005 and 2009 by nearly 10% and that unfavorable views had also risen (Pew, 2010b). Depending on the survey, Evangelicals, Mormons, and atheists also do not fare well in general public perception (Pew, 2007; Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

How do such negative attitudes encourage negative, exclusionary behaviors? Although we want to leave space for thoughtful, civil disagreements about religious truth claims, our concern is for how these attitudes contribute to the discourse of who does and does not belong in American society and serve to justify outright religious tolerance.

Religious Tension

The step from intolerance to outright tension seems a short one; we find little coincidence that American attitudes toward Muslims declined at the same time that outright resistance to Muslim communities increased. Putting aside the controversy over Park51, the proposed Muslim community center in Lower Manhattan, since 2008, 35 proposed mosques and Islamic centers across America

have encountered outright resistance from the communities of which they sought to be a part. For many, concerns about traffic and noise were cited as the main reason for resistance; fear of Islam, terrorism, and Shar'ia were named outright in others (Pew, 2010a). The recent banning of Shar'ia by over 70% of voters in Oklahoma, even though Muslims make up less than 1% of the Oklahoma population, points to more instances of intolerance shifting to outright tension and exclusion (Moghul, 2010).

The Power of Interfaith Cooperation

Given these recent trends toward ignorance, intolerance, and tension, interfaith cooperation offers a response to the challenge of religious diversity that not only prevents civil strife but also builds stronger communities. From this perspective, interfaith cooperation is not just a nice idea for those interested in spiritual dialogue and growth, but shifts to become a matter of greater civic concern and a possible to solution to concrete social tensions.

Social science research into the relationships of diverse communities confirms this. In his look at how diversity negatively affects social capital, Putnam argues that when a community or individuals engage diversity through cooperative action, social capital increases dramatically. In other words, when a diverse society finds ways to bring people of different backgrounds together to work on projects, in organizations and associations, the community is strengthened in spite of its diversity; in addition to social cohesion, creativity and productivity are likely to increase for that community (Putnam, 2007).

In fact, other social science data show that bringing people together from diverse backgrounds can actually prevent conflict. Ashutosh Varshney looked at what caused some cities in India to remain peaceful and some cities to dissolve into violence when tensions broke out at the national level. In the peaceful communities, Varshney discovered what he calls "networks of engagement": formal and informal lines of association between diverse communities. Where these lines were more formal and centered on common activities, community ties were stronger and able to withstand tensions that embroiled other cities (Varshney, 2003).

For all the furor and noise this summer over Park51, Qur'an burnings, and which religions are "truly" American, we saw evidence that many such networks of engagement already thrive in America. If the infamous Terry Jones's attempted Qur'an burnings represent an extreme of religious intolerance, the ways that major religious leaders stood in solidarity with American Muslims and condemned Jones's actions to the rest of the world represent the way that networks of engagements can be activated to diffuse religious tensions and intolerance (Goodstein, 2010). Local stories abound as well: In the days leading up to September 11, 2010, Muslims in Chicago led an interfaith walk that brought diverse communities together from across the city to stand up against domestic violence. In response to the planned Qur'an burning, the Muslim community in Gainesville, Florida, sponsored a "Read a Qur'an Day" with local Gainesville faith communities. If networks of engagement did indeed prevent conflict from breaking out, the challenge at hand, then, is to elevate and strengthen such preexisting networks while creating more networks and opportunities that build interfaith cooperation.

Strategies for Building Interfaith Cooperation: Literacy and Encounter

As we look at America's diversity, and the past summer of ignorance, intolerance, and tension, the challenge at hand is how we can better channel diversity toward cooperation, rather than conflict. The good news is that we know what works: spreading interfaith literacy and promoting

positive, meaningful encounters between people of diverse religious backgrounds with a focus on common action.

As mentioned above, attitudes toward diverse religions correlate strongly to the amount of knowledge one has toward someone of another faith, so that the more one knows about a religion, the more likely he or she is to have a positive view of that religion (Pew, 2007). Additionally, religious *misinformation* seems to be particularly difficult to counter with correct information (Nisbet & Kelly, 2010). Although the subject of interfaith literacy is deserving of its own article, we would like to suggest the content. Given this, we argue that spreading religious literacy is an important key to fostering interfaith cooperation. Additionally, because we are concerned not just with knowledge, but knowledge as is relevant to building relationships and with that social capital and cohesion, we advocate for appreciative knowledge of diverse traditions that promote common action—what we might call *interfaith literacy*.

The subject of interfaith literacy deserves its own article. That said, we offer a few initial suggestions of what interfaith literacy might look like. First, interfaith literacy involves what we might call a “theology of interfaith cooperation”: knowledge of how one’s own faith or philosophical tradition offers an imperative for engaging with others. Second, it involves knowledge of the important historical moments in history that speak of interfaith cooperation: the peaceful coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in medieval Spain; the way King worked with Abraham Joshua Heschel during the civil rights movement. Third, it necessitates a basic appreciative knowledge of other traditions, and last, it includes knowledge of the shared values—such as mercy, compassion, and hospitality—that exist between different religious traditions.

Next, we advocate creating opportunities for meaningful encounters that both transform negative attitudes and build social cohesion. Just as knowledge about a religious tradition has the power to shift perceptions from more negative to more positive, actually knowing someone of a particular faith positively impacts one’s attitudes toward that religion (Pew, 2007; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). For example, of the 43% of Americans in the 2007 Pew study with a favorable view of Muslims, 56% had a personal relationship with Muslims; of the 35% with an unfavorable view, only 29% had a personal relationship with a Muslim (Pew, 2007). Putnam and Campbell (2010) refer to this as the “Pal Al” phenomenon—the more likely one is to have a Pal Al of a particular religious perspective, the more likely one is to have positive attitudes toward that group overall; personal relationships break down stereotypes and distrust.

Further, Putnam and Campbell (2010) think these relationships are strongest and have the most influence on broader attitudes when they involve common activities that build social capital (Putnam, 2007, also speaks to this). This finding corresponds to more classic theories of intergroup relations of how prejudice and conflict can be overcome by giving individuals on opposing sides opportunities to work together problem solving on a common project (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1988). Thus, if you not only know but also engage in cooperative work with your Pal Al, your positive inclination toward others in Pal Al’s group will be stronger.

Building Interfaith Cooperation: Campuses and Universities, Student Leaders⁴

Just as there are institutions and individuals behind the active propagation of religious intolerance, we need institutions and leaders who can actively promote and build interfaith cooperation (Patel,

⁴ For a more in-depth look at how we understand campuses and student leaders building interfaith cooperation, please see two other pieces we have written for the *Journal of College and Character*: Patel and Meyer (2009) and Patel (2007b).

2010). Because knowledge and appreciative encounters appear to be the key components in building interfaith cooperation, we echo the suggestions of the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships that college and universities, and the student leaders they nurture, offer a key proving ground for interfaith cooperation and the means to significantly shift the ways people from diverse backgrounds interact in America.

Colleges and Universities

If indeed knowledge and encounter are the key strategies for building interfaith cooperation, American colleges and universities are uniquely situated to create real change on this issue. As mentioned above, campuses exist to promote knowledge with an eye to civic engagement, even as they work to foster meaningful encounters among student groups. Colleges and universities often serve as microcosms of America's broader religious diversity, where students of different faiths regularly interact with one another in close quarters, often for the first time. This happens in a space where they are encouraged to question, challenge, and explore their own identities and those of others. Further, if they practice a faith in college, it is often because it is specifically their choice, rather than as a result of family expectations or habit. In other words, questions of identity, diversity, and relationship are raised simply by the campus context.

Arguably, higher education is about educating students for global citizenship, contributing to the common good, and strengthening social cohesion (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2007). Such education demands an engagement with the reality of religious diversity as well as fosters an approach for both the appreciative knowledge and meaningful encounters that interfaith cooperation requires. For a campus that is concerned not just with the knowledge students obtain in the classroom but also the kinds of relationships they have on campus and the ways they will lead after graduation, engaging religious diversity should be a key priority.

In doing so, colleges and universities need not start from scratch. Institutions of higher education have already played a leadership role in many of the social change movements of the past. Campuses have proactively engaged multiculturalism, GLBTQ issues, gender equality, and environmentalism, leading to significant culture shifts around each of these issues and giving a clear imperative and model for engaging religious diversity. If colleges and universities engage religious diversity with the same ambition and resources that they dedicate to other identity and diversity issues, there is an opportunity for lasting impact beyond the sphere of higher education to the broader culture.

Student Leaders

In addition to institutions, we look to college students to be the leaders of interfaith cooperation, both on their campuses and in the world beyond campus after graduation. If knowledge and relationships are key to interfaith cooperation, then an interfaith leader must be someone who can spread a vision of interfaith cooperation to others with the kind of interreligious literacy we mentioned above: knowledge about the stories, texts, and histories within various traditions that offer the imperative of cooperation. If the data above are right, then sharing and spreading these kinds of appreciative stories and knowledge are the first steps in transforming attitudes and building interfaith cooperation.

But more than just having stories and knowledge, an interfaith leader must be someone who has the skills to bring people together in shared activities, the kind of activities that create more Pal AIs and, in doing so, build social capital and cohesion. Campuses already have infrastructures,

like community service centers, chaplaincies, and offices of multicultural affairs, to support student leadership in such endeavors. These activities tap into deep religious and humanist values, actively foster and create relationships across lines of difference, and provide opportunities for gaining an appreciative knowledge of the religious other. They also serve the secular, civic end of improving social cohesion between diverse groups.

Although a college or university can actively promote interfaith cooperation through its mission and vision, cooperation itself will not catch on in a powerful way unless students take significant leadership to empower and motivate their fellow students. We believe there is a particular role for young people to play as leaders of this movement. First, young people have played significant roles in many other social movements—consider the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s role in the civil rights movement, or young Gandhi when he began organizing in South Africa. Second, young people have a particular lens on the issues of religious diversity. Even as the daily news and political discourse are fraught with examples of religious conflict and tension, many American young people have grown up with friendships with people of different faiths. Add to this the unmatched commitment to service and civic engagement exemplified by the Millennial generation, and we see a clear opportunity for students to be leaders of interfaith cooperation (Stone, 2009).

Conclusion: A Call to Action

If campuses empower their students to be leaders of interfaith cooperation, and if students, in turn, channel their energy, creativity, and passions into building that cooperation, we imagine a sort of virtuous cycle in which campuses continue to be transformed by their students’ leadership around this issue, even as campuses foster and graduate more students with this worldview. In a time when religious diversity looks so divisive, the opportunity for leadership around interfaith cooperation is clear.

The good news is that many campuses are already taking interfaith cooperation on campus seriously. This past August, Interfaith Youth Core staff gathered at DePaul University with 75 faculty, staff, administrators, and students who are leading this work around the country. Many of those gathered have been running exceptional campus interfaith programs for years; many were newer to this work. All agreed that the imperative for our work had increased dramatically and that it was time for higher education to take religious diversity seriously, in a way that both empowered students as leaders for this work and that could create a ripple effect in higher education as a whole. Such a strategy spoke of a tipping point, with colleges and universities leading the way in shifting how America more broadly thinks about its religious diversity.

Jon Dalton of *Journal of College and Character* was present at that meeting and invited those gathered to share their insights with the *JCC* as an opportunity to further this movement. We are pleased to share with you a special issue of the *JCC* on interfaith cooperation and higher education. We hope these articles will offer readers best practices, new insights, and a call to action.

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