

Building an Interfaith Student Movement

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When my friend Cassie was a teenager, she devoted her life to Christ. She started going to a pretty conservative evangelical church outside of Seattle, where she was raised. She lost herself in praise songs, learned about the importance of saving people, went on church retreats, and spent as much of her free time as possible with the other kids in the youth group.

When she graduated from high school, Cassie went to a liberal arts college in Wisconsin. There were only enough Christians there to form a single student group. It included mainline protestants and evangelicals, people who were accustomed to smells and bells rituals and speaking in tongues. It also included Catholics. This was something of a challenge for Cassie. Where she came from, Catholics weren't Christian.

Soon, Catholics became the least of Cassie's theological worries. During her time as an undergraduate, Cassie became friends with a young Muslim from Bangladesh. She found him to be righteous and pious and kind, many of the qualities that she had at one point associated only with evangelical Christians. Moreover, Cassie realized, that just as her Muslim friend presented her with the challenge of engaging with and relating to somebody from a different religion, she represented the same for the Muslim. One evening, he asked Cassie if he could interview her. Cassie said sure, and asked why. It turns out that the young Muslim was doing a project for an anthropology class. He had seen Cassie's Bible and cross, had observed her Wednesday night prayer song circle, watched her go to church on Sunday mornings, paid attention to the distinct language with which she talked to her brothers and sisters in faith, and had chosen to make an ethnographic inquiry into the exotic life of the American Christian.

Although perhaps funnier than most, this story is not particularly unique. College campuses are, after all, a place of awakening and encounter. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Illinois in the mid-1990s, most of those awakenings and encounters were around the issue of race. Multiculturalism was all the rage. I remember my own awakening to the fact that I was not white, and what that meant. I remember meeting black people who didn't believe that Thomas Jefferson was only a great democrat. I remember meeting Native Americans who didn't believe that Columbus was a great discoverer. I remember the countless hours discussing nomenclature: black or African-American, Hispanic or Latino, Native American or Indigenous Person.

What I do not remember is much talk about religious identity. It was my father who pointed this out. I would return home for Thanksgiving or Winter Break and regale him about how we had to deepen into our identity as people of color. Mostly, he ignored me, grumbling about how his hard-earned money was

going to pay my tuition only so I could fill my head with radical spangles. But, one day, he turned to me and said, if you want to talk about identity, ask why there is a systemic killing of Muslims in the Balkans and the west does nothing.

Something occurred to me. In all the sociology courses I took on identity, in all the late night conversations we had at Allen Hall on the subject, the issue of religion rarely came up. We were always talking about freedom for women or Latinos or lesbians. Identity was always defined as race, class, gender and occasionally sexual orientation. When I became a Resident Advisor, half of our training focused on dealing with issues around those particular identities. I had been to many programs at the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, and they also always focused on the same things. We talked about the limited roles for black actors, the discrimination that kept gay politicians in the closet, the burden of the second shift for women, the cultural capital that accrued to middle class kids because of the circumstances of their birth. We extolled bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldua for their ability to write about these various identities in an integrated way, and filled hours debating whether the oppressions associated with each identity *added* together or *multiplied* together. But right now, as we griped about Denzel Washington getting passed over for the Oscar for *Malcolm X*, an inter-religious war was raging in the Balkans and tens of thousands of people were dying, and *religion was nowhere to be found in the diversity discussion*.

My own personal life was taking a turn towards the religious. I had become very involved in the Catholic Worker movement and was increasingly reading Buddhist spirituality. Ultimately, this exploration would lead me back to a deep engagement with the tradition of my birth, Islam. Somebody suggested I read Diana Eck's Encountering God, a wonderful memoir that articulates the intersection of faith and interfaith.

I loved Diana's description of life as a young Methodist in Montana, going through Sunday school and Bible camp, and then having her world opened up when she moved East, first to Smith College, and then beyond the border to the land of my birth, India. She went there to study religion, and there may be no more colorful carnival of faith anywhere in the world than India.

She was astonished when Hindus poured yogurt on statues as a form of worship, and they returned the surprise when they saw her praying with her shoes on.

Those twin experiences, growing up as a Methodist in Bozeman and doing a study abroad on Hinduism in Benares, shaped the career and commitments of one of our best known scholars of Indian religions.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as Diana was teaching her courses on Indian religions at Harvard, she noticed more and more young Indian Hindus, Muslims, Jains and Sikhs in her class. They would show up for office hours and tell her stories of the temples that their communities were building in places like Toledo and St. Louis. They would talk about the Hindu summer camps they attended in upstate New York or the Muslim *din intensives* they attended on weekends.

It slowly began to dawn on Diana that religious diversity was not just a Far East phenomenon, but an East Coast one too. Diana did a little exploring and discovered that, in addition to Jewish and Christian groups on campus, there were thriving Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist associations. Some of their programs drew hundreds of students. Questions began to emerge in her head: what are the numbers on these religions in this country; how are they being changed by America; how are they, in turn, changing America? Like people all over the country in the early and mid 1990s, Diana was involved in a whole set of diversity discussions taking place on college campuses. She noticed the same thing that my father pointed out: "Religion was the missing 'r' word in the diversity discussion."

The fact that religion had effectively been left out of the multicultural movement had very serious implications. College campuses effectively transformed themselves at every level to take race seriously. They implemented affirmative action policies in both student admissions and faculty/staff hiring, insuring that the campus had a broader range of racial and ethnic diversity present. Campuses encouraged their student services wing to take seriously the identities of these new student populations. At the University of Illinois, where I was an undergraduate, black and Latino students had their own student councils in the residence halls and their own cultural houses. They invited high profile speakers to campus to address race issues. Jesse Jackson and Maya Angelou were two of the people that came to Illinois when I was there. Campuses opened up Multicultural Affairs Offices that did trainings for students, staff and faculty on issues relating to racial identity. Even the academic programs on campuses expanded to engage race and ethnic identity more seriously. The highest profile was Harvard's Afro-American Studies Dept, led by former Duke professor Henry Louis Gates Jr and counting, the leading African-American intellectuals in the country as members – Cornel West, Anthony Appiah, William Julius Wilson. I do not cite these changes as an argument about whether campuses did enough to deal with race, only to say that it was an issue that was proactively and seriously engaged. And, as we know from recent events at Duke, questions about how much more and what else needs to be done continue.

I tell this story for two reasons. Number one, because I believe the rationale for colleges to take race seriously was not simply about the campus. I think this was an attempt by the institution of higher education to have a positive impact on the broader society. The thinking goes something like this: we live in a segregated and racist society. Campuses are a unique place where people from different racial backgrounds can come together, commit themselves to an anti-racist agenda, develop an appreciation for cultural narratives that are poorly represented in high school textbooks and in the media, nurture relationships between people from different backgrounds, perhaps even change attitudes. And because colleges graduate a society's leaders, and often set a country's intellectual and cultural agenda, the attitudes and relationships nurtured on the American campus would have an impact on race relations in the broader society. We can argue about whether it was enough or whether the strategy was correct or whether the intervention came too late, but I think that people would generally

agree that we live in a less racist society than existed 30 years ago and it is at least in part due to the attention that campuses gave to race.

Now, I turn to my second point, really the larger point of this talk. Why has so little of this happened around the issue of religious identity? Why, when my friend Cassie was asking what it meant to encounter a Muslim, were there few professionals on her campus that could help her think intelligently about religious diversity and interfaith cooperation? Why was there so little talk of religious identity when I was an undergraduate, and so much of the news in the 1990s was dominated by conflicts between religious communities – Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Hindus and Muslims in India, Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the Balkans? Why, when Diana Eck started to explore religious diversity at Harvard, did she find so few resources or serious thought applied to that issue?

I think the time is right for college campuses to engage religious diversity in a serious way. I think this makes sense for the central mission of higher education – which is to educate students and to create an environment conducive to that end. Moreover, I think that if the American campus engaged religious diversity seriously, it could have a powerful and positive impact on pressing social issues, both in our country and abroad. Finally, I think students can play a key role in this effort.

I want to talk about this at four levels: context, theory, methodology and action.

Let's start with context. In 1965, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox wrote that "The rise of urban civilization and the demise of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our time and they are closely related." He and a whole host of others effectively predicted the end of religion. Science would provide our explanations, products would provide our comfort, art would provide our meaning. It was only a matter of time for the Vatican to become Disneyland Rome. That died somewhere between the presidential election of 2000, when secular liberals discovered that evangelical Americans could put one of their own in the oval office, and September 11, 2001, when people suddenly realized that religion had to be dealt with in foreign affairs as well.

To continue for a moment with the race analogy. One hundred years ago the great African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois wrote "The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line." We are far from solving that problem. And even so, it appears that the issue of the 21st century will be the question of "the faith line".

The United States is in a unique position address the faith line. We are the most religiously devout country in the west and the most religiously diverse nation in the world in an era of global religious conflict. The religious landscape of America has changed dramatically over the past half-century. Harvard professor Diana Eck calls it the story of a Christian country becoming the most religiously diverse society on earth. There are approximately six million Jews in America, between three and four million Buddhists, nearly a million Hindus, and perhaps as many as six million Muslims. Here is one glimpse into that story.

Many of America's founding fathers, including Jefferson and Franklin, attended services at the Episcopal church. Today, there are just over two million Episcopalians in America. By contrast, there are, according to most estimates, approximately six million Muslims in America. That is three times the number of Episcopalians.

The combination of our religious devotion and our religious diversity puts us at the crossroads of the most profound crisis currently facing humanity. Virtually every religious and ethnic community in the world is represented in America, including ones that are at war elsewhere. Thus far, the violence between Sunnis and Shias in Baghdad, Hindus and Muslims in Bombay, and Catholics and Protestants in Belfast has had no serious repercussions in Boston. But, in a world where tensions travel in nanoseconds over the internet, that scenario is not impossible.

I believe America can prevent those tensions from taking root here. But I think we have to be far more intentional about nurturing the alternative to interfaith conflict. I think that means taking religious diversity seriously. And I think if we get that right in America, the rest of the world may pay attention. That means that the model we build in Boston might have repercussions in Belfast, Bombay and Baghdad.

The question is, which institution is going to lead the way? I think the answer is obvious: higher education. The American campus is a unique space. It gathers people from small towns and big cities, superpower nations and countries who can barely feed their own population; it manages to encourage both identity commitment and pluralist community; it values both individual freedom and contribution to the common good. Its experience with addressing the issue of race, while far from a perfect parallel, might well provide some clues, and some mistakes to avoid, regarding how to 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.

Any serious engagement with a new issue requires a theory. I think the theory that should guide our engagement with religious diversity is the theory of pluralism. Political philosopher Michael Walzer articulates the challenge of building a diverse society: "How are we, in the United States, to embrace difference and maintain a common life?" Effectively, he is saying that the cornerstone of a diverse society is positive relations between its different communities. Religious pluralists hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.

Anything less is a disaster waiting to happen. In his study of inter-religious violence in India, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, University of Michigan political economist Ashutosh Varshney discovered that there was one significant

difference between cities in India that remained relatively calm during times of inter-religious tension and cities that exploded in sectarian violence. The cities that remained calm had what Varshney calls, “networks of engagement”, basically civic organizations that brought people from different backgrounds together on a regular basis. When tensions flared, those people knew each other well enough to not want to kill each other. And they had basic tools – phone trees, for instance – to prevent tensions from escalating into violence.

Recent surveys show that almost forty percent of Americans, asked to honestly examine themselves, say that they have some prejudice against Muslims. About the same number believe that Muslims should go through stricter security procedures at airports. Over 1/3 of Americans believe that Islam is more likely than other religions to promote violence. These Americans may not know it, but they are talking about their neighbors. They are talking about their co-workers, their doctors. They are talking about people that play little league baseball with their children, bring food to neighborhood potlucks, pay taxes, serve in the armed forces, vote.

The Holy Qur’an says that “God made us different nations and tribes that we may come to know one another.” The Varshney study exemplifies the importance of people knowing one another. A March 2006 Pew report also bears this out. It states that, of Americans who do not know a Muslim, only 50% have a positive view. But of respondents who said they did know a Muslim personally, 74% claim to have a positive view of the Muslim community. Clearly, we need to provide more ways for Americans of different faith to come to know one another.

That brings us to the question of methodology. Avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of interfaith work. The Scylla is that we are all the same. The Charybdis is that we are so different, we can’t even talk. The middle path is learning that there are common values that all faiths share, but that each faith has its own approach to that value. These values include hospitality, compassion, service and peace. We have to hold such universal values up for all to see, while we create the space for each community to articulate what the value means to them. I believe this accomplishes Michael Walzer’s challenge of embracing difference while maintaining a common life.

So how to make this methodology concrete? At the organization I run, the Interfaith Youth Core, we do it through interfaith service-learning projects – bringing people from different religious communities together to act on the shared values of hospitality or service or compassion, and then providing the space for each to articulate their unique approach to such values.

The ingredients for interfaith service projects clearly exist on college campuses: diverse religious student groups who want to have relationships and do service projects; a recognition of the importance of building diverse communities on the part of administration; established volunteer programs and centers. Perhaps what is needed is the right types of partnerships. The volunteer center organizes the service program; the religious student leaders bring out their members; the administration provides some funding; a group of student leaders is put together to run interfaith discussion.

Student role:

- Campuses are looking for a way to address the challenge of religious diversity. Students can run programs that provide a model;
- The multicultural movement and the service-learning movement got rooted on college campuses because of student activism, and not just the type that protested administration policies. Also the type that provided concrete ideas for engaging real issues.
- Higher education is a very linked system. When students do something on one campus, it is very often picked up by others. Things like Alternative Spring Break started at one or two places, and then spread. The same can happen through interfaith service-learning.

In 1998, I started an organization called the Interfaith Youth Core which seeks to meet the above challenges through an interfaith service-learning methodology. Essentially, we facilitate programs that bring young people from different religions together to volunteer – building houses, tutoring children – and then share what it is in their different religions that inspires this work. In this way, young people have the opportunity to live out the service ethic in their own faith and learn about the same in others. They build relationships with people from different religions on the universal value of serving others, while having the space to talk about how service is unique in their own faith.

For eight years, the IFYC ran programs on five continents involving tens of thousands of young people. Today, we are largely a training organization that helps equip religious communities, universities and civic institutions with the tools to run their own program. Our goal is to create the new city on a hill that I talked about earlier. I would like every religious community in America to include in its curriculum how different faith communities value service. We hope every university in America one day has an interfaith student council and professionals on staff with a background in religious diversity issues. We would like every city, campus and suburb to host a Day of Interfaith Youth Service. Last year, thirty cities and campuses in America participated. One day, we hope it is three thousand.

Our goal is nothing less than culture change. If you are young and religious in America, part of what you should be about is coming together with people who are different from you to build understanding and serve others. In America, we volunteer, we go to school, we vote, we cheer our local sports teams, we come together from our different backgrounds to serve the common good.