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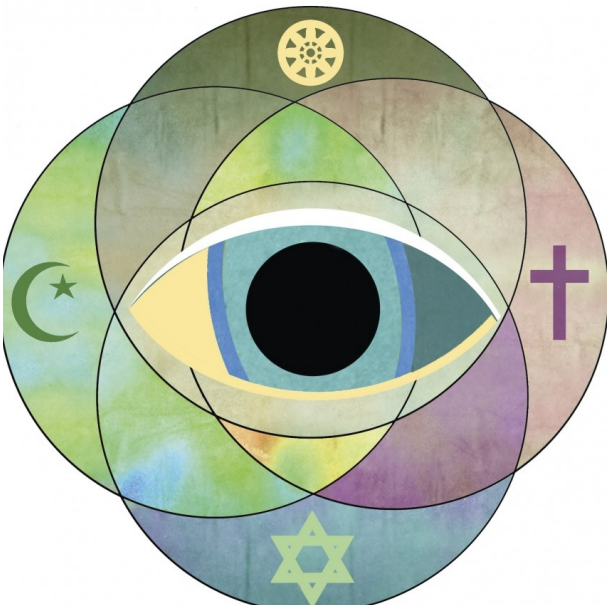
COMMENTARY

Faith Is the Diversity Issue Ignored by Colleges. Here's Why That Needs to Change.

By Eboo Patel | OCTOBER 29, 2018



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

I speak on more than 20 campuses a year, and one thing that has struck me recently is that nearly all of the colleges I visit are expanding diversity education. Whether it's first-year orientation programs, new general-education requirements, or training that is mandatory for student leaders, engaging race, gender, and sexuality is fast becoming a standard part of a college education.

This is a positive development. Our society expects colleges to define what it means to be an educated person and to advance their students to that standard. Any reasonable definition of an educated person in this diverse democracy has to include knowledge of America's history and traditions (the good, the bad, and the

ugly) with respect to race, gender, and sexuality, and the skills to teach, coach, build, heal, and lead in environments that are increasingly defined by that diversity.

After listening to the laudable plans of college administrators and faculty members for strengthening diversity education, I often inquire about how much time they are allotting to increasing their students' understanding of religious identity and diversity. Answers range from "I'm not sure" to "Probably not enough," along with the occasionally surprised look that the question was even raised.

What this means is that, in an era when colleges are expanding their engagement of diversity issues, and at a time when religion plays a central role in public life and global affairs, religion continues to be the dimension of diversity that many institutions leave out.

I believe this is educational malpractice. Religion has long been a vital part of this country's body politic; failing to educate the next generation of citizens on the role of religion in our democracy is the equivalent of failing to teach doctors how the circulatory system works.

How should colleges teach about religion? I propose a civic approach, one that emphasizes the various norms, laws, central figures, key documents, social dynamics, and historical turning points that are essential first to understanding, and then to strengthening, a religiously diverse democracy.

It is important to know, for example, that religion is the dimension of diversity that our Founding Fathers came closest to getting right. Those straight white male slaveholders somehow managed to create a constitutional system that protects freedom of religion, bars the federal government from establishing a single church, prevents religious tests for those running for public office, and offers more than a few poetic lines about the importance of building a religiously

diverse democracy. This history is especially relevant at a time when exclusionary talk regarding Muslims emanates from the highest office in the land. It helps students ask and answer the question, "What are America's ideals with respect to religious minorities?"

In a time of both growing diversity and widening polarization, a single session or an entire course on religious diversity not only offers a window into the American tradition but also helps students consider whether religious language might serve a unifying role in our era. This provides an interesting point of exploration into other religions: What unifying language and symbols might traditions outside of Christianity offer the United States at this time? Could the Muslim city of Medina — where the Prophet Muhammad and his companions were welcomed by the residents, and both immigrants and hosts were considered holy for their cooperative spirit — be such a symbol?

Religious identity has a special status in American law. If you are an inmate in Arkansas and you want to grow a beard longer than prison regulations allow, neither your age nor your race nor your sexuality gives you any standing in requesting said exemption. But if you are Muslim (or Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Jew, etc.) and say that you believe growing a beard is required by your religion, the U.S. Supreme Court will take your case, and you will win, 9-0. This special status sets up a dynamic in which religion conflicts with other identities, as in the Masterpiece Cakeshop case, in which a gay couple sued a baker who refused on religious grounds to make their wedding cake. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the baker.

Such controversy is all the more reason for college students to be educated about religious-identity issues. Diversity, as a friend of mine likes to say, is not rocket science — it's harder. It requires precisely the kind of broad reading and deep thinking that is the mark of a college education. And, because so much of our civil

society is based on faith-inspired social capital, being an educated person when it comes to religious-diversity issues connects directly to professional competence and effective citizenship.

Presenting specific cases represents an excellent civic approach to education about religion. It requires students to come up with their own questions and inspires them to seek their own answers. It is a liberal-arts approach to addressing concrete, practical, and unscripted problems. Research by the Interfaith Diversity Experiences & Attitudes Longitudinal Survey, led by Alyssa Rockenbach and Matthew Mayhew and administered by Interfaith Youth Core, has demonstrated links between using case studies as a teaching tool and achieving civic aims like students' gaining wider appreciation for a variety of religious identities and for positively bridging religious difference in general.

Colleges are in a good position to teach the interfaith literacy and leadership skills in a civic approach to religion. After all, they draw together students from diverse religious identities in an environment that seeks to affirm group identity, build a diverse community, expand knowledge, and deepen skills. In other words, campuses are mini-versions of religiously diverse democracies. As such, they can play a special role in helping the religiously diverse democracy in which we live be a place where diverse faith groups engage one another in a spirit of respect and commitment to the common good.

Eboo Patel is founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core, a nonprofit group that works with colleges on issues of religious diversity. This essay is adapted from his recent book*,* Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise *(Princeton University Press, 2018).*

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