

# Interreligious Experience: Seeing Beyond the Classroom

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What do we gain from interreligious encounter? How do such encounters affect our perspectives? To what extent do such encounters follow us, potentially shaping even our professional paths?

These are challenging questions, and they have occupied my thought for several years, stemming back to a profoundly moving experience that I had a number of years ago, while leading a college course.

## **From a Classroom to Real World Engagement**

My moment of awakening came as I was serving as a Dean at a university in Texas. The private institution had about 2,500 students, and some expanding diversity, though it had served a predominantly white student population, historically. Among the mix of diverse students was a sizable contingent of individuals from countries around the globe. A significant portion of the international students were from Saudi Arabia.

In this term, I was offering an introductory world religions course. The course had drawn a diverse mix of students, which pleased me. We had students from several ethnic backgrounds, as well as multiple different countries. Among this group were several students from Saudi Arabia, as well as one young man who had sought me out well before the beginning of the term to ask me questions about the course.

I came to find out that the unusually inquisitive young man was a veteran of the U.S. military who came to our institution, in part, because it was designated by the Department of Defense as a veteran-friendly campus. I also learned that he had travelled extensively around the globe and had some exposure to various religious systems during his active military duty.

As we opened the course, I explained that, in each of our units, student teams would add to our discussion by creating a video presentation focused upon one ritual tradition that holds an important place within a given religious system. These presentations would be offered throughout the term, as we engaged specific religious systems. So, off we went, on a journey aimed at helping students to cultivate a sense of appreciation and understanding of differing religious systems.

In general, the course flowed well through most of the term. However, sometime after spring break, we began our unit on Islam. A group of students prepared a brief video on the art of reciting the Qur'an and presented this work to the class at the beginning of the unit. The group had interviewed a local Imam, who spoke about the standard rules for the recitation of the Qur'an, the history of Quranic recitation, and offered some select and relevant hadith. As well, he offered his own melodic *qira'a* (reading).

Even as the short student film began, I saw the veteran in our class begin nervously fidgeting in his chair. Within a few minutes, he had picked up his books and quickly pushed his way out of the classroom. The student had performed well in the course to that point and I was surprised by his exit, but assumed that an emergency had arisen. Yet, it became apparent that more was going on than I had realized when he did not return for the next two class meetings and avoided my attempts to reach out to him. Eventually, I was able to track him down on campus and ask him about his departure from class.

In a lengthy and gut-wrenching conversation, the student confessed that he had tried to challenge himself to remain in the class, but could not, once the unit on Islam began. Particularly difficult for the student had been the Quranic recitations.

The student told me about his experience serving in Iraq during the clean-up phase following the second Gulf War. He related the experience of being the target of sniper fire and seeing friends killed before him by roadside IEDs. He had seen the American flag burned and had been the recipient of blows by rocks thrown by small children in the streets of Iraqi cities.

Over time, he had come to associate these painful memories with the broad faith of Islam, in his mind. It had become especially difficult to see images of Muslims, or to hear the call of the *muezzin* or the recitation of the Qur'an.

The young man expressed his desire to drop the course. I explained to him that we were nearly two-thirds through the course materials and that he had done well so far. He acknowledged the work that he had contributed, but said he could not return to the course. And with that, he chose to exit the course.

Even as this student wrestled with his own experiences in Iraq, my three Saudi students approached me about their peer's behavior. They felt offended by his exit from the class during their presentation and were further agitated that the student had never returned.

I spoke with the Saudi students at length and explained the situation. They never fully understood how the religion that they loved could have been associated with acts of violence. However, as I further explained to them that the young man would not be returning to the class, they accepted the outcome, with some disappointment. Yet, one of the students asked me how

we could ever hope to better understand one another if we chose not to speak. The question is a powerful one.

Both the Saudi students and the veteran had authentic and deeply held convictions that informed their perspectives. Both, I believe, had a genuine desire to learn from one another. Still, the outcome led to division rather than engagement.

There are some positive endings stemming from this case. The Saudi students went on to complete the course and their degree studies at our university. As I saw them on campus occasionally, they routinely commented upon how useful the course was to them in terms of their foundational preparations. As for the veteran who was in the course, he did not return to this class. Still, a couple of semesters later, he decided to attempt the course again, and completed it successfully.

As I moved through this experience, I was certainly left with some lingering questions. What circumstances could have altered this outcome? How could we better prepare individuals to navigate interreligious encounter? What is the responsibility of the university in helping such parties gain the tools necessary to avoid similarly strained encounters?

### **The Value of Interreligious Engagement**

Based upon my years in the classroom, I believe that education can serve as an antidote to episodes of religious conflict. In regard to the situation that unfolded on my own campus, I believe that a greater depth of understanding regarding the faith of Islam might have helped my own student separate the formal religion from personal experience.

However, what is also clear to me is that such encounters are not limited to the environment of the classroom. While I do know that classrooms may well be the preferred

environment for such encounters, because they offer a safe setting for uncomfortable conversation, I am keenly aware that the awkward interaction I mediated could have well taken place in a professional or public setting where the stakes might have been higher. It is for this reason that I strongly believe that interreligious engagement should be central to the foundational learning experience that we give to our students. Further, it appears that I am not alone in this belief, as leaders from across our social spectrum are noting the value of such engagements.

In a speech delivered as a part of the Coca Cola World Fund Talk, in Atlanta, in January 2013, Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, argued that colleges and universities have a vital role in helping to define the appropriate parameters for interreligious engagement. And he went on to call for institutions of higher learning to play an even more purposeful role, stating that colleges and universities must seek to train individuals:

...who have the knowledge base and skill set needed to engage religious diversity in a way that promotes peace, stability, and cooperation—and to begin offering academic programs that certify such leaders.<sup>1</sup>

While Patel's call is noble, it is not purely altruistic. Both Patel and others have begun to voice the need for businesses, public schools, non-profits, healthcare companies and all sorts of industries that support broad customer and client pools, to be better prepared to respond conflicts rooted in cultural and religious misunderstandings.

The value placed upon intercultural competence by prospective employers of new college graduates was vividly underscored in the recent American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) study, *College Learning for the New Global Century*. In that broad survey of employers, a strong concern was voiced regarding the limited ability of many college

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<sup>1</sup> Eboo Patel, "Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies," *Liberal Education*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (Fall 2013).

graduates to recognize and assess important cultural differences. Indeed, one of the skills sets most desired by employers for its new hires was enhanced cultural competence. Based upon the survey, more than 70 percent of prospective employers voiced a desire for colleges and universities to better prepare students in each of three areas: 1) the understanding of “Global Issues,” 2) the acquisition of “Intercultural Competence” and 3) “Intercultural Knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

And it is not merely lessons regarding the histories of specific religious systems that employers desire. The competency being sought by employers is one that is rooted in the practical application of knowledge. Employers desire to see courses and programs that are applied in scope and seek to help students be better interpreters of culture and mediators of cultural disputes. In other words, it is not merely information transfer that is being sought, but the development of skills aimed at the deployment of that knowledge.

In the recent study, *Interfaith Cooperation and American Higher Education*, best practices for the cultivation of interreligious awareness were outlined. Central to this list was an emphasis upon “professional application.” In that regard, report authors recommended that university courses and programs focused upon interreligious understanding be structured to pay heed to the diverse potential application of core skills to a broad array of fields, including, “health care, journalism, business, ministry and social science.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even this list may well be too narrow. The report went on to recommend that interreligious and interfaith programs

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<sup>2</sup> *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007), Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges and Universities, p. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> *Interfaith Cooperation and American Higher Education: Recommendations, Best Practices and Case Studies* (2010), Chicago, IL: Interfaith Youth Core, p. 13.

specifically include experiential learning opportunities through which students might actively apply concepts gained to real world problems.

The best practice recommendations included in this report mirror themes highlighted in the 2015 study of employer attitudes, *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success*. That study, conducted by Hart Research for AAC&U, found that many employers surveyed placed greater value on a group of core desired skills than upon a graduate's major, as they assessed applicants. Among the most desired skills highlighted was experience in solving "problems with people whose views differ from their own," with some 96 percent of employers citing this as a valuable learning outcome. Moreover, some 78 percent of respondents in the same survey indicated that "college students should gain intercultural skills and an understanding of societies and countries outside of the United States."<sup>4</sup> While the survey did not ask specifically about religious cultures, it seems clear that the goals articulated can only be accomplished if interfaith issues are addressed within the curriculum.

Professionals, meanwhile, are often required to do more than exercise a specific set of skills within a defined office setting. Such individuals are typically encouraged to play leadership roles within the community, extending their influence beyond the bounds of their own workplace. In the study, *Falling Short?* some 86 percent of respondents indicated a belief that university education should provide students access to "the civic knowledge, skills and judgment" to help them contribute to the larger society.<sup>5</sup> Might interfaith study also encourage

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<sup>4</sup>Hart Research Associates, *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (2015), Washington, D.C. American Association of Colleges & Universities, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

students to be more civically engaged, by helping individuals be more accustomed to working directly and even mediating within highly diverse groups?

### **From Global to Local**

Of course, while broad, national survey data is helpful, it may not always be in synchronicity with local experience. In order to better understand the relationship between such national survey results and local perceptions within one specific region, my university engaged in collaborative research with the Fort Worth and North Texas Chambers of Commerce during 2016 and 2017, aimed at better understanding local perceptions regarding the utility of interreligious engagement. Through this collaboration, a survey and focus groups were utilized to solicit the opinions of more than 100 individuals identified as area business and community leaders.<sup>6</sup> Respondents represented a broad range of organizations, ranging from non-profits and governmental agencies to large and small private companies and even some multi-national corporations.<sup>7</sup>

Consistent with national survey data, the results of this research appear to indicate a relatively broad-based perception among influential community and business leaders that some form of interreligious training is increasingly in demand. In particular, when asked whether an individual familiarity with various religious traditions and practices is a “competency that would benefit employees” in the present workplace, 71.2 percent of respondents indicated a belief that

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<sup>6</sup> Survey respondents reported being associated with the following industrial fields: Education – 24.3 percent; Non-profits and NGOs – 17.5 percent; Healthcare – 14.6 percent; Legal and Accounting – 6.8 percent; Manufacturing – 4.9 percent; Government Supply and Contracting – 4.9 percent; Transportation – 3.9 percent; Oil and Gas – 2 percent; and Other – 21.4 percent.

<sup>7</sup> Of the respondents, 32.7 percent reported being associated with a “small employer” (defined as fewer than 50 employees); 18.3 percent reported being associated with a “medium-sized employer” (defined as having between 50 and 200 employees); 19.2 percent reported being associated with a “large employer” (defined as having between 201 and 1,000 employees); and 29.8 percent reported being associated with a “very large employer” (defined as having more than 1,000 employees).



such a background would be “extremely helpful,” while an additional 21.2 percent indicated that such knowledge would be “somewhat helpful.” Less than 3 percent of those surveyed indicated a belief that such a competency would be either “minimally helpful” or “not helpful at all.”<sup>8</sup>

When asked whether they might use or recommend a program in interfaith training, should it be available, respondents voiced significant interest. Of the respondents, 49 percent stated that they would “certainly” use or recommend such a program, while an additional 27.9 percent indicated that they would be “likely” to access such a program. Meanwhile, 16.3 percent indicated that they would “possibly” use or recommend such a program, and only 6.8 percent indicated that they were “unlikely or would not access or recommend such a program, if it were offered.

While these results seem to underscore a very strong interest among business and community leaders in some sort of formal interreligious training, there does appear to be slightly greater diversity of views regarding the optimal structure for such a program. When specific program format options were presented, respondents voiced the greatest interest in “short-term skills trainings” or “one-year post-graduate certificate programs.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, respondents were asked how universities could better prepare graduates to navigate and find success within religiously diverse workplaces, and the responses were varied. Among the suggestions offered by respondents were the following:

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<sup>8</sup> An additional 4.8 percent of respondents to this question observed that a competency in understanding various religious systems would be “occasionally helpful.”

<sup>9</sup> When asked about the preferred format for a program aimed at providing existing employees with greater understanding of issues associated with “cultural and religious differences,” 70.2 percent of respondents identified a preference for “short-term skills training,” 20.7 percent indicated a preference for a “one-year post-graduate certificate program,” 4.8 percent indicated a preference for a master’s degree program, 3.8 percent indicated a preference for a traditional four-year undergraduate program, and less than 1 percent desired a two-year associate degree program.

- Require all students to take a “global citizenship course;”
- Require at least one course focused upon “diversity training;”
- Have students engage projects with a “multicultural emphasis;”
- Hold “interreligious dialogue” sessions on campus;
- Promote global travel and exchange experiences.

Beyond these highlighted examples culled from the more than 100 different suggestions offered, a further comment proved interesting. As one respondent observed, students frequently fail to recognize the importance of such training, until they graduate and are in the workforce.

Accordingly, this individual recommended that religious diversity training of some sort be made mandatory for all students, regardless of their major.

### **Our Interreligious Future**

In a 2014 address to the United Nations General Assembly, then President Barak Obama sought to describe the energy that he saw youth exerting toward the goal of overcoming cultural and religious divisions. In an optimistic statement that seems to echo outcomes desired by individuals across the public sphere, President Obama observed:

Around the world, young people are moving forward hungry for a better world. Around the world, in small places, they're overcoming hatred and bigotry and sectarianism. And they're learning to respect each other, despite differences.<sup>10</sup>

More than ever before, community and business leaders are recognizing the vital need for employees who are prepared to play such roles in offices, schools, hospitals and other locations throughout the neighborhoods, towns and cities that we inhabit. And while the data that I have

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<sup>10</sup>“Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly” (2014), Speech delivered at the United Nations Assembly Hall, New York, N.Y., September 24, 2014, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

referenced here is largely U.S.-centric, I do not believe that its lessons are limited in their geographical relevance. Interreligious engagement is critical to the future of relationships across the globe. The question we must ask is whether our emerging and future leaders are prepared to meet the challenges ahead that will be rooted in religious and cultural difference.