WHAT DO COLLEGE STUDENTS WANT?
A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO
MULTIFAITH INVOLVEMENT

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PRECIS

The author presents research findings about the preferences of college students as they consider coming together with people of other faiths in multifaith settings. He discusses what works well and what does not. Select quotations from interviews are included. The author suggests a practical model for multifaith work on campus based on the principles represented in the acronym "RAM." Multifaith involvement should include being Respectful toward the beliefs of others, being Authentic to one's own tradition, and having Meaningful interreligious interaction.

Introduction

Our university and college campuses focus a great deal of attention on diversity. This is a proper focus and one that is needed in our society. Religious diversity, however, is often left off the agenda and may be subsumed under a rising tide of secular animosity that says there is no place for religious expression in the academy.

The *raison d'être* of an academic institution is education. We must decide how religion and religious diversity fits into that goal. Should we safeguard the academic enterprise, viewed as largely secular, by making religious expression a private matter? Do we enhance learning by exposing students to various forms of religion? If so, what is the best way to do it? How do we respect differences

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among the religious, the less clearly defined "spiritual," and the irreligious? How do we help members of these groups find points of commonality and human connection? More pragmatically, when our own and our students' time is limited, what should the priorities be for those in campus ministry? How should time be apportioned in terms of multifaith activities and involvement in the practices of one's own religious tradition?

These questions led me to pursue a doctor of ministry degree focused on interreligious interaction between students. I wanted to know how best to meet the needs of a religiously diverse student body. I found that there was no research available that addressed my concerns from the perspective of religious practitioners—from the standpoint of those who held strongly to a particular faith tradition. I wanted to know what college students thought about these issues.[1]

I conducted research at the college in the northeastern United States where I work, to answer the question, "How do religiously involved students think about coming together with people of different faiths?" I invited nearly half of the 1,600-member student body to participate in the study. Of these, 212 returned a survey questionnaire. I subsequently conducted interviews with ninety-two of these students in fifteen two-hour focus groups. These groups were homogeneous by faith tradition. Religions represented included Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Taoist, Yoruba, agnostic, and atheist.

I included students who self-identified as agnostic or atheist as separate groups in recognition that a wide array of belief systems are essentially religious in nature, or faith-based, in that they depend on certain super-empirical presuppositions that are beyond anyone's ability to prove with certainty. As Christian Smith has suggested, everyone is a believer, whether religious, spiritual, or nonreligious.[2] For additional information on the methodology of the study and results, see my *Religious Pluralism*.[3]

There were three clear findings from the study, and these formed my thesis. The key findings were that: (1) Religious students have a commitment to a set of beliefs, regulations, symbols, rites, and practices and want these particularities to be respected, appreciated, guarded, and understood in multifaith interactions. (2) Provided the first condition is met, religious students are eager to learn about and from the faith of others. This is especially true in informal settings and multifaith dialogue, as opposed to multifaith services. (3) Multifaith events are valued primarily for their educational benefit, cultural expression, and potential to deepen relationships.

These three findings and their implications for religious life on campus will be discussed below, utilizing focus-group interviews, including some representative quotations, and my own experience in campus ministry.

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[1] Paul V. Sorrentino, "What Do College Students Think about Religious Pluralism? A Study of Students at Amherst College," doctoral thesis, Princeton (NJ) Theological Seminary, 2005.

[2] Christian Smith, *Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 153–154.

[3] Paul V. Sorrentino, *Religious Pluralism: What Do College Students Think? A Study at Amherst College* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009).

I. Religious Students Have a Commitment to a Set of Beliefs, Regulations, Symbols, Rites, and Practices andWant These Particularities to Be Respected, Appreciated, Guarded, and Understood in Multifaith Interactions.

Religions do share much in common with one another. However, the particularities of one's own faith tradition are of special importance to faith adherents. This encompasses more than doctrinal differences between religious traditions. Religion can be a significant and complicated aspect of one's identity. In addition to learning about one's own religion and practicing it, several other factors were identified as things that made a person's particular faith important to them. I will mention just some of these.

First, religion provides a source of community and predictability as students practice their faith on campus. A Catholic student said the important thing about her religion was that

> it's part of a broader community. I think what I enjoy most about Mass on campus are some of the similarities to Mass at my church where I grew up . . . No matter what church service you go to, as long as it's a Roman Catholic service, the prayers used and the rites used are very similar. So, to a certain extent, it doesn't matter what physical church you're in, that it's one larger church.

Second, even for students who are not active in practicing their faith, there can be a strong appreciation of what their faith gives to them and how it helps them to identify with their culture. A Hindu student said:

> It's very much more than the religious aspects. It's a cultural thing. We're all Indian, and we're all in this country, and we don't have family, so this is what we do. And religion is a part of that, and so is getting together and eating together and stuff like that. So that would be the defining religious experience of my life, just these family friends who share a common cultural background. In the temple, in our Sunday school type place, it's just kids I've grown up with and kids my age who we feel really comfortable talking with because we've been doing this for the last 8–10 years of our lives. You all know where you're coming from, you all realize the difficulties of being a first-generation immigrant in this country, and that makes a religious experience easier.

Third, an important element in thinking about one's religion was the place of family. In fact, the largest study of teenage religion and spirituality ever conducted in the U.S., the National Study of Youth and Religion, showed that the most significant influence on the religious life of adolescents is their parents.[4] A Jewish student echoed these findings: "The thing for me, for religion, is family. I really find that the religious value is a family value, a traditional value. So more importantly for me . . . is that I go home for most of the religious holidays, as opposed to participating in the Hillel events."

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[4]Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 261.

In all these ways, the specific elements of one's religious beliefs are important. That is why Christians are upset if they cannot say the name "Jesus" in a service, why Jews who keep kosher are offended when someone serves a meal for them with little or nothing they can eat, why observant Muslims feel insulted when alcohol is served with the assumption that everyone drinks alcohol. A similar thing happens on campus when professors and peers assume that everyone is sexually active.

Yet, it is even more complicated than this might imply, for particularities of belief are often imbedded in an intricate cultural web that transcends an individual's religious identity. This complexity is evident in the comments of a Muslim student who reflected on the importance of educating others about her own faith tradition:

> I think what it brings to the campus more than anything else is just an opportunity for other students to . . . learn about the Muslim faith . . . [and] to see what Muslims are like. I don't think it's any different from any other faith-based group in that regard. . . . It tells people that you know what, not all Muslims are terrorists and trying to kill Americans—especially after 9/11. . . . Sometimes you feel that you're almost forced to defend views that you don't necessarily [hold]. It's strange, because you don't want to be defending those in the first place: they're not integral to your faith. But that's not saying that it's not integral to the faith of a lot of people who share your faith. So it's a very difficult situation sometimes.

This multi-layered aspect of faith points to one of the distinct challenges of religious pluralism. Much more than religious or philosophical ideas, it includes deeply personal values and traditions that have connections with a constellation of other elements of importance to the individual and his or her culture. One finds the meaning of a religion in the particulars that distinguish it from another faith tradition. It is the specific language used and rituals practiced that will make an individual feel that his or her beliefs are valued, even when these may be largely symbolic for a given person.

Sociologists recognize the place of narratives or stories that people use to communicate complex meaning and events. Several overlapping roles and accompanying stories represent each person. An individual might be an American, a student, a son, and Jewish. Each role is important. The distinct combination of roles helps to create the person's identity. Changing any part of the configuration would significantly alter the person's story. Our religious beliefs are imbedded within our own cultural and personal narratives. In addressing religious pluralism, we must be mindful of the religious particulars that vary from one tradition to another, and within traditions, as well as the added power and influence of a person's intersecting narratives. These are all woven together in a way that is difficult to separate.

Our religion is much more than some propositions we say or believe. Our religious beliefs and practices are often augmented by parental and cultural influences and expectations. Speaking with someone else about another religion or attending the services of a different religion may raise conflicting emotions. One may feel as though one is being disloyal to one's parents and community and to

God. Even learning about another faith tradition may seem to be an act of infidelity. For example, Christians and Jews use the analogy of marriage with reference to God. Just as one is to be faithful to one's spouse in marriage, so one is to show fidelity in one's relationship to God.

In sum, people want their own religion, their particularity, to be respected, and this is a more complicated matter than at first it may appear. It is essential to understand the importance and complexity of a person's religion in terms of her or his own identity. If we are to move toward a healthy religious pluralism, we will need to keep in mind the place of religious particularity as well as commonality. If students in the study felt that they could trust the people involved to respect their own religious traditions, then, as the second point of my thesis states, they were quite eager to learn about the faith of others.

II. Provided the First Condition Is Met, Religious Students Are Eager to Learn about and from Others' Faith, Especially in Informal Settings and Multifaith Dialogue, as opposed to Multifaith Services.

The focus here is on what it means to meet the first condition of this second point by being respectful of others' beliefs in multifaith interactions. What are hindrances to our communicating respect and what sets the stage for learning from one another? Effective ways of learning from one another are offered in Part III, below.

Today there are many things that divide us. Religion should provide a basis for respecting all people, but too often it serves as a primary avenue for keeping us apart. I am especially concerned with finding ways to include the more conservative elements of religious groups in interreligious interactions. Too often, it is only the more progressive groups that will meet on an interreligious basis. In order to understand what will help us come together, we also need to understand why some are reluctant to do so.

Hillel sponsored a conference in Washington, DC, in March, 2008, titled "Imagining a More Civil Society: The Summit on the University and the Jewish Community." One of the keynote speakers was Robert Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. He said that individuals need to "bond" with one another in groups that look out for each other's interests. "Bridging" is the term he used for groups' reaching out across groups to "share their social capital."[5]

Many times, religious groups take a binary position. A particular group wants to focus on "bonding" because the outside world is so threatening: "We need to strengthen our relationships so we can make it." Or, a group may take the approach that they must focus on "bridging," because the outside world is so threatening: "We need to force people together so they will get along." As Putnam insists, we must allow for both and encourage both in order to do either well.

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[5]"Summit Speakers Focus on 'Bonding' and 'Bridging,'" available at http://www.hillel.org/about/news/2008/mar/summitbonding_25march2008.htm.

It is much like one of my favorite cartoons that shows two sailors desperately hiking out on opposite sides of a boat. The caption reads, "Two sailors frantically steadying a (steady) boat."[6] If the sailors stopped pulling against each other, they would be fine. Similarly, we need to stop the binary approach to bonding or bridging and support both. We will then find that people's relationships are enriched within and outside of their group, they are freed to ask questions of themselves and one another; one hopes they will stop fighting each other and come up with more creative solutions to the problems of our day.

Perhaps the first obstacle to bringing people together from different faiths is negative associations. People have immediate reactions to such terms as "interfaith" and "religious pluralism" that may prevent them from going to an interreligious activity. I need to clarify what I do and do not mean by religious pluralism.

The term "religious pluralism" has at least four meanings, with one of them generally emphasized at any given time. The first is simply plurality of religions. There are some 10,000 religions in the world, with 150 of those having at least 1,000,000 members.[7] A second meaning is civility and tolerance in the public arena. This sort of religious pluralism provides a basis for a society that respectfully allows for differences without requiring a commitment to any one religion or no religion. A third use of the term—and this is the way I am using "religious pluralism"—is inclusive particularity. This approach affirms religious differences—particularity—while also seeking points of common interest and values. It seeks to deepen understanding and relationships through various means such as dialogue and community service. The fourth meaning of the term is what most people seem to think of when they hear "religious pluralism" or "interfaith." I call this exclusive commonality. This fourth form of religious pluralism aims to unify the religions. The focus is on shared aspects of religious traditions. Differences are largely ignored and viewed as varying perspectives of the same Divine Reality.

I can affirm the first three definitions as approaches that are authentic, respectful, and meaningful. The third, inclusive particularity, addresses well the three major findings of my thesis. I believe that the fourth perspective focuses on commonality at the expense of specific religious expression, beliefs, and values. It says, essentially, that we should focus only on what religions share in common because that is what is most important. This does a disservice to adherents of a specific religious tradition who value their faith precisely because of the differences between their religion and that of others. Exclusive commonality fails to recognize the significance of the various overlapping narratives of an individual that contribute to his or her identity and provide added meaning to one's religion.

Sri Lankan theologian Vinoth Ramachandra, writing about this fourth approach to religious pluralism, stated:

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[6]Paul Watzlawick, John H. Weakland, and Richard Fisch, *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 37.

[7]"How Many Different Religions Are There in the World? In the United States?" available at http://www.adherents.com/adh_faq.html#howmany.

> It fails to respect true 'otherness'. It savages pluralism in the name of de-fending it. What is put forward as a humble way of relating to the rich diver-sity of human religious traditions quickly turns into a reductionist onslaught on the factual affirmations of those traditions, with the Semitic traditions tak-ing the brunt of the assault. What we are left with is a series of Procrustean beds on which a new élite of self-styled 'progressive' theologians dismember the religions of the world.[8]

In interreligious interactions, there is a continuum of emphasis between par-ticularity and commonality. Where there is an intentional effort to maintain the distinction between religions by allowing for difference and commonality, I think it makes sense to use the term "multifaith." When the primary emphasis is on commonality, then "interfaith" may be more accurate. This distinction allows for clearer communication about what the person attending an event and the par-ticipants might expect.

Exclusive-commonality approaches to religious pluralism often intend to represent a variety of religions. When interfaith groups meet regularly, particu-larly for interfaith worship services, I think it likely that what initially began as multiple religious representation changes. The rituals, symbols, and worship forms of different religions repeatedly expressed may actually become a new religion—a new orthodoxy. The focus is no longer on commonality among the religions but on a new form of particularity. People end up enjoying the richness of their own new tradition rather than a diversity of different religious traditions. To use Peter Berger's term, the group develops its own "sacred canopy."[9] In this case, building a "bridge" becomes "bonding," and a new religious group is formed.

It is precisely the fear of this process of religions being subsumed that pre-vents many from participating in cross-religious activity. This seems to be espe-cially true of the more conservative elements of a religious group. If a multifaith group only has progressive members of different religious traditions represented, then it is worth asking if some of the hindrances being discussed in this paper are keeping conservative students away.

A second hindrance is unease about unwelcome and overbearing religious conversation. Because people believe their religion is a good one, probably the best one, they may be uncomfortable when someone "pushes" another religion on them. For instance, a Buddhist student talked about his efforts to talk a Chris-tian out of his faith:

> My freshman year I had a lot of Christian Catholic friends and half the time we spent arguing about everything. So I was almost able to convince my friend that he's not religious and he's not Christian, and that was excellent. . . . He was almost an atheist after we talked to him, but at the end of the year he went back to Christianity because he decided that he needed a god somehow.

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[8]Vinoth Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* (Down-ers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 127.

[9]Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

It is understandable that people have strong ideas about their own beliefs and would like others to share them. An educational institution should protect people's right to talk about their own faith. It is important, however, that any discussions of one's faith with others are respectful and that no one feels coerced into a discussion or situation that leaves them feeling uncomfortable and as if they have no choice but to be there.

Eboo Patel, a Muslim from India, founded and directs the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago. He tells a story about hiring a new staff member. The woman, a Christian, was concerned that her belief in the divinity and uniqueness of Christ would be offensive to her Muslim employer. I appreciate Eboo's response:

> I have the deepest respect for your faith. I sure hope you think it's true, because otherwise there would be no reason to stay committed to it. I think my religion is true, too. So let's make a deal. We can both believe our religions are true, we can even privately hope the other converts, and we can work together in this organization to serve others. In that way, we, an Evangelical Christian and a devoted Muslim, can model what we say this organization is about: people from very different faith backgrounds finding common purpose in helping others."[10]

Note that Patel's position did not deny the truth-claims of either faith, and he even allowed that each would like the other to convert. This kind of relationship allows for people to get to know each other without fear and to understand one another's faith as well. This is what inclusive particularity looks like. It is what Diana Eck was referring to when she spoke about pluralism as actively engaging with people of other religions:

> Pluralism makes room for real and different religious commitments . . . Pluralism does not require relinquishing the distinctiveness of one's own tradition of faith to reach the 'lowest common denominator' . . . Pluralism is the process of creating a society through critical and self-critical encounter with one another, acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences.[11]

A third hindrance to interreligious involvement is the stage of faith development of students. I find that older students are more comfortable in multifaith settings. Initially, students are liable to hold firmly to a particular position and to be less likely to ask questions. As they go through college, they develop a more open and reflective posture. The Spirituality in Higher Education project has been studying college students. They have found that students develop in several key respects, relative to religion, during their years of college. Students in their third year of college are more likely than first-year students to see "developing a meaningful philosophy of life"[12] as important and to be "engaged in a spiritual

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[10]Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim—The Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007), p. 163.

[11]Diana L. Eck and the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a CD-ROM (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[12]*Spiritual Development and the College Experience: An Analysis Conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, University* of California at Los Angeles, April 5, 2004, p. 3.

'quest.'"[13]

The comments of an atheist student from my study illustrate this same point:

> When I came to Amherst, I was pretty eager to share my opinions and to challenge people to think beyond their religion, and to think about what their religion meant, and to think about God, and the existence of God. I'd readily get into a debate about it. I've really eased up over the years to understanding that, as strongly as I believe what I believe, is how they feel about their religion, and as firm as I'm going to stay put in my belief, I know that they will too. So, for me, to try to sway them in thinking that something that they believe as strong as I do, is not very productive. And I'm starting to think about what good things religion brings, and what things I can identify with (mainly, community, when I think about people going to church, or the celebrations and rituals), things that I can appreciate and can identify with them, instead of challenging my friends. I've really noticed a transition in the four years.

James Fowler has named six stages of faith development. A typical first-year college student would be in Stage Three, "Synthetic-Conventional," with its interpersonal emphasis and the desire to meet the expectations of significant others. Students may move into the demythologizing fourth stage, "Individuative-Reflective," with its enhanced capacity for self-critical and ideological reflection and responsibility.[14] The third stage is more dependent; the fourth, more interdependent.[15]

Sharon Parks has described the difficult time of transition between these third and fourth stages. In a vivid metaphor, she says it is a time when the student is drifting away from a dock that has been "sure moorage, to move out into the deep waters of exploring for oneself what is true and trustworthy."[16] It takes some security and confidence to move out into deep waters, which is why younger students, with all the transitions inherent in entering college, tend to stay attached to what they know. For most students, coming to college is unfamiliar and risky, so sticking close to one's own faith provides a source of comfort and stability.

Theory, research, and experience predict that older students are likely to be in a better place to engage in serious discussions with people of different faiths. Students in Stage Four should generally be more able to listen to the perspective of another and to be less concerned about what others will think of them. They should be prepared to respect and value the "other" in light of their unique combination of beliefs, problems, ethnicity, gifts, and questions. This is likely to be more challenging for younger students.

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[13] Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin, *Spirituality in College Students: Preliminary Findings from a National Study* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2003), p. 2. Also see Higher Education Research Institute, "Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose," available at http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/.

[14] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), pp. 151–183.

[15] Scotty McLennan, *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew up with Has Lost Its Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 1–32.

[16] Jeff Astley and Nick Wills, "Adolescent 'Faith' and Its Development: Introduction and Implications," *Youth and Policy: The Journal of Critical Analysis*, no. 65 (Autumn, 1999), p. 67.

A fourth hindrance to significant multifaith involvement in the U.S. should be mentioned. American youth, in general, have a limited knowledge about their religious tradition. This was so evident in the National Study of Youth and Religion that the researchers developed a term for what describes the religious view of the majority of adolescents: "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." The creed of this belief system can be stated this way:

> 1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
> 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
> 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
> 4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
> 5. Good people go to heaven when they die.[17]

This belief system is "actively displacing the substantive traditional faiths of conservative, black, and mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism in the United States . . . It may be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society."[18]

Smith and Denton suggest that the primary reason for the rise of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the lack of religious education for youth in most religious traditions. What exists has often taken on the form of a teenage support group with little or no religious substance. Youth learn that they should do good things, as it will make them feel better, and that God may be vaguely related to all of this. The emergence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as the default religion of youth means that multifaith involvement often involves a sharing of mutual ignorance with regard to religious traditions. I believe that chaplains have an educational responsibility in teaching the belief tenets of their respective faiths. Multifaith involvement should enhance rather than detract from this educational endeavor. This is one reason why the multifaith council at Amherst College has intentionally restricted the number of events and meetings they hold. The council wants to be sure that representatives from different religious traditions have time to be involved in their own respective religious activities and that the multifaith council does not become a replacement for one's own religious tradition.

III. Multifaith Events Are Valued Primarily for Their Educational Benefit, Cultural Expression, and Potential to Deepen Relationships.

In a lecture given at Amherst College, Dr. Muhammad Ajmal Khaki, a Muslim scholar from Islamabad, Pakistan, said, "The purpose of interfaith dialogue is to bring the followers of faiths into harmony, not to bring the faiths into har-

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[17]Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, pp. 162–163.
[18]Ibid, p. 262.

mony."[19] This is an important distinction. Students reported that their favorite way to come together with people of other religions was in personal friendships when they could have meaningful discussions. A Jewish student reported on her experience with a Muslim roommate:

> I went to a Global Young Leaders Conference . . . and my roommate was from Jordan, and her brother was a suicide bomber. So of course I wasn't going to tell her I was Jewish, because the first thing she does is put up the Palestinian flag on the wall I'm sitting there like, oh great, now I'm going to be shot in the middle of the night. She and a bunch of her friends had come with her and they ended up getting in a fight with the Israeli kids. I ended up telling her I was Jewish and we ended up talking about it and it was the most amazing experience of my life, but for the first two days it was like, oh, in, out of the room, no talking.

This is a great illustration of the power of personal interaction to "bring the followers of faiths into harmony" so that relationships and understanding are both deepened. This was all the more poignant because of the experienced and anticipated antipathy between the two religious groups involved.

Lectures and panel discussions are effective ways of creating a nonthreatening learning environment where people can comfortably listen and ask questions. For instance, we had a panel discussion, "Does God Want War?" just prior to the Iraq War in the Spring of 2003 that was particularly appreciated by students. A Muslim student said: "We had a panel, and each religious advisor came and they said something informative. . . . It was in no way a debate. No one was sitting there going like, 'Well mine's right.' It was like, 'I want to know what other religions think.' It was very informative."

Other information lectures and panels have been well received, such as "What Islam Is Not: Debunking Myths and Stereotypes," featuring several professors from the College. These settings provide important avenues for people to come together from a variety of belief perspectives. Ideally, they come to the place where they are able to discuss differences in the context of relationship instead of simply abstract, competing ideas. A Protestant student commented:

> I lived in a predominantly Muslim area in Nigeria for ten years. . . . I liked the stuff that was done recently on the Geneva Accords. I found it really instructive because the things that the lady was saying [were] exactly just like what I've come to agree with. Which is that groups from traditions need to get together, especially in a place like Israel, where you have this long-running rivalry. I think the same thing would be said of the issue in Northern Ireland between the Catholics and Protestants, or in Nigeria between the Christians and Muslims. People from opposite sides need to form relationships, need to get together, even if they're not going to love each other—listen to each other, try and respect each other, try and see where the other people are coming from.

This student generation has sometimes been referred to as "crap detectors"

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[19]Muhammad Aslam Khaki, paper presented at the Interfaith Listening Project, Amherst College, September 24, 2004.

because they are so attuned to anything that is not genuine. They do not want a watered-down version of a religion but want to see it as it is really practiced. Attending services of another tradition is one good way to have an authentic experience of a different religion. A Hindu student remarked:

> I think the world would be a better place if it were required for all of us to go to everyone's religious services every once in a while, just to see what's going on. . . . People stay in their own little world. O.K., maybe I chose Hinduism as my religion, that's fine. But I'm doing a disservice to myself and this campus if I'm not learning about Christianity and Islam and Judaism. It's a horrible way to live. Not to at least know what's out there and know what they're doing and to see that common bond, that no, they aren't your religion, but they're good people and they believe in something. The inability to understand that on this crazy liberal campus is still there. No one knows about anyone else's religion. You're either not religious or religious and stay in your own little bubble.

The Jewish group, Hillel, and the Christian Fellowship have held a very popular series of evening events for several years. The Christian students join the Jewish students for their Shabbat service and dinner, then the Jewish students join the Christian students for their service. Participants understand that each group will try to conduct their service in the same way they normally do. There is some allowance made for the guests and some orientation comments, but the intent is to provide each group with a genuine experience of the other's religious service.

Below are some other ideas that have been especially effective. The "House of Abraham" project has Christian, Jewish, and Muslim students work together on a Habitat for Humanity building project. Others learn together about how to respond to disasters and raise money for aid to victims of tragedies such as Darfur and hurricane Katrina. The Interfaith Youth Core[20] has been an invaluable resource in helping us to learn to do service projects together and then to be able to reflect on common values that motivate us to serve others. We have also held essay contests to address how best to conduct interreligious activities.

"Scriptural reasoning"[21] is a method of studying religious texts with members of different faith traditions. A sacred text is read and then talked about from the various perspectives represented. Miroslav Volf has referred to this as "hermeneutical hospitality" and considers it a gift exchange. He says that "such hermeneutical exchange of gifts will help people of faith to better understand their own and others' sacred texts, see each other as companions rather than combatants in the struggle for truth, and how better to respect each other's humanness and practice beneficence. The point is to help them argue productively as friends rather than destructively as enemies."[22]

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[20]See the website of the Interfaith Youth Core at www.ifyc.org.

[21]A special issue of the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2 (May, 2002), on "The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning," is available at http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume2/number1.

[22]Miroslav Volf, "A Voice of One's Own: Public Faith in a Pluralistic World," for a conference on "The New Religious Pluralism and Democracy" at Georgetown University, April 21–22, 2005, p. 17; available at http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/x_volf_voice.pdf.

Multifaith or interfaith services[23] were the least popular method for students in coming together with people of other faiths. There are four main reasons for this. The first and second reasons are related—namely, that students tend to feel both a sense of discomfort, and a sense of being spiritually unsatisfied. A Jewish student commented:

> I also feel uncomfortable . . . I'm just less satisfied, I don't feel as much [in a multifaith service] as I'm experiencing spiritually when I go to, for example, a Saturday morning service that's all in English. Just because, what's spiritual for me, or what I'm used to, or whatever, it isn't that. It's very difficult to have an interfaith, regular service that is very meaningful to everyone.

A third major complaint about multifaith services was that they were inauthentic. We have already discussed the importance of authenticity for this generation. A Protestant student said this about multifaith services:

> I didn't really feel that what my beliefs are about was really presented in a way that does it justice. So that kind of bothers me, partly just because I feel like what other people see of my religion is not really what it is. At the same time, I feel that, if I feel that way, then what I saw of the other religions in that circumstance, I don't know how much I can trust either. Because I don't know if that's really representative of the other religions.

A Hindu student made a similar comment:

> I don't really think that [a worship service] can be shared among different religions, unless you take all the religions out of it, and then it's simply humanistic and nobody's happy. . . . I've been to services where it's like a church but they don't talk about God, I'm always wondering, what are we doing in here? The basic human level, they've basically obliterated it so it's not even really religious anymore, just loosely spiritual.

A fourth problem with multifaith services stems from how they are viewed. Eighty percent of students interviewed thought of interfaith services as primarily cultural events. They were not something they attended as a means to heighten their own experience of worship. A Buddhist student said: "It'd be more like, for me, [a] cultural event. Maybe it's because I'm not that religious. If you put a lot of religions together in this religious service, I'm not sure it's still something you call religion. . . . I think it's a multi-cultural event."

These four concerns about multifaith services are significant and need to be taken into account if such a service is being considered. Yet, despite these concerns, I believe there is still a legitimate place for multifaith services, provided they have a clear and significant purpose that will help ameliorate people's reluctance to attend.

One such purpose might be to enable people to come together when there is a major event that affects the entire community, be it a tragic or a joyous occa-

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[23]See my reason for preferring "multifaith" to "interfaith," above.

sion. If there is a death that affects the community, for instance, then there may be a need for the community to grieve and reflect together. This happened across the U.S. after the attacks of September 11, 2001. A multifaith service may be an appropriate venue with the added dimension of transcendence. When there is a celebration, such as at graduation, then a multifaith service may be appropriate as a way to represent the variety of religious traditions present in the student body.

After September 11, the Rev. David Benke, a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod minister, said a prayer at an interfaith service at Yankee Stadium in New York City. Subsequently, Benke was suspended by his denomination for his participation. A church official stated that "to participate with pagans in an interfaith service and, additionally, to give the impression that there might be more than one God, is an extremely serious offense."[24] Benke, however, said, "Not to make the primary human connection at a time of civic, national and global tragedy would be a great pastoral error."[25]

Beyond the unifying pastoral role that multifaith services can play when a major event affects the entire community, such services can also be useful where there is a shared value across traditions that should be emphasized for the sake of the community. A far-reaching value, such as the need to transcend racism, may well be addressed in a multifaith format. For instance, a service in honor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., might be multifaith in recognition that he both crossed religious lines in his civil rights efforts and had a clear religious motivation underlying his work.

A well-done multifaith service may also serve as a "plausibility structure"[26] for religion in general. I think that religious beliefs on campus can be divided into five categories. First, there are those who have a commitment to a particular religious tradition and believe in an external, definable, largely transcendent reality. A second group may not have a clear identification with a tradition, but its members may be open to belief in an external reality. These may be called agnostic or spiritual but not religious. A third group of secularized individuals might believe either than there is no external reality or, if there is, that it is irrelevant. There are also a fourth and a fifth category on either side of this continuum who are either religious fundamentalists or secular fundamentalists. In a highly secularized culture, there may be some benefit to religious people and their sympathizers coming together to learn, work, and celebrate in a variety of formats, including multifaith services.

When I conducted this study, I was especially interested in how students experienced a multifaith service as they went through it. There were four clear responses, with the first three being much more frequent than the fourth. The most common stance was that of an observer. This position meant that the person was watching and learning during the service, but not engaging in it as a religious experience. The second most frequent was the posture of seriatim or serial participation. In this stance, the person felt comfortable participating in

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[24]"Minister in Interfaith Service Is Suspended," *New York Times*, July 9, 2002.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 151.

some aspects of the service while being a respectful observer for other parts. The third position was participation with filtering. This posture meant that the person did participate in the service throughout, but he or she translated or filtered aspects of the service that did not conform to his or her own religious tradition or beliefs. For example, a Catholic student said: "I was thinking at least in the MLK [The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Multifaith Celebration], when someone of another faith prays, I do close my eyes . . . I think, I do pray with them. . . . Of course, my prayer is directed to whatever God I pray to, but—I think unless there's a big disjunction, I can still find it useful." The fourth stance, participant, was significantly less common than the other three. This person felt comfortable fully engaging in all aspects of the service as they were presented.

The most contentious discussions in my focus-group interviews had to do with prayer in public settings. Should prayers be general or specific? The vast majority of people preferred prayers to be specific and representative of particular religions. A Muslim student's statement typified their views: "Making it religiously neutral . . . you might as well not have an interfaith event or interfaith service. . . . [Christians] can say whatever it is that they would normally say. . . . I think people can decide for themselves what they agree with and what they don't. . . . I don't feel that any one side should feel ostracized."

However, there were also good reasons articulated to be circumspect with regard to prayers that might offend some. A Jewish student expressed his views about a prayer offered at the inauguration of a U.S. president:

> I think the fact that it's televised, that it's done in front of an audience, that it's at the inauguration of the leader of our country, that there ought to be some consideration. There certainly is a religious space open for that consideration. You don't have to pray "in Jesus Christ's name." I promise you that's not written anywhere: 'you've gotta do it.' You could say in God's name, and be a whole lot more inclusive, and that you should, because you're speaking to a much broader audience. [The speaker]'s not an idiot. He knows that there were people who were listening, watching, in the audience, who don't pray to Jesus Christ. It also seems sort of strange to lead a prayer, and I know that it wasn't a thirty-second prayer—it was a lengthy prayer, and then to end it with "in Jesus Christ's name," and to have to sort of step back as someone who wouldn't sign onto that letter, and have to redirect your thoughts. I think it's disconcerting, and unnecessarily so. I think a lot of Christians can do themselves the favor of just praying to God if they're in mixed company.

These two quotations nicely summarize the different views and complexity of issues surrounding public prayer. Any prayers offered in a multifaith environment necessarily entail that the audience will have a variety of perspectives on prayer, including whether or not they pray at all and, if so, to whom they pray. Public prayers in these situations are best said in the first person singular rather than first person plural. This makes it clear that any prayers offered, even on behalf of the community, are said by the person praying without any assumption of universal agreement. We discussed above the place of overlapping stories and roles in defining people's identity. The offense taken by Jewish people at

prayers "in Jesus' name" seems to relate directly to the history of atrocious things done by people "in Jesus' name" to Jews in particular. It is worth noting that no biblical prayers conclude with "in Jesus name."[27]

When we gather for a multifaith service at Amherst College, there are five things we would like people to understand. The first is the specific purpose for our gathering. What is the reason we are doing this as a multifaith event (for example, community crisis, celebration, shared values)? Second, we want them to know that their own particular beliefs will be respected, whatever those are. Third, each person helping to lead the service is being true to his or her own beliefs and practices. Fourth, this is a different genre of religious expression, and they should not expect it to be experienced in the same way as an event in their own religious tradition. Fifth, they should feel free to participate or not participate in the service to the degree that they wish.

The following are some guidelines we have developed for working with a group to plan a multifaith gathering. We discuss these at the beginning of the process:

Planning: The process should include representatives from each of the faith traditions participating in the gathering. Trust is important when it comes to the vulnerability of expressing our faith publicly. The more developed the relationships between participants, the greater the trust level will be and the more enriching the event. The planning phase is when important decisions need to be made about what specific activities are appropriate and acceptable to all participants and faiths represented. For instance, should a Christian pray "in Jesus' name"? Is it acceptable to Jewish participants if a candle is lit at a service occurring on the Sabbath? Can people take pictures during the service? Can music be played immediately before or after a Muslim member's part of the service or during the service at all?

No single person should dominate the planning. Ideally, a multifaith team would co-lead the planning process. Pragmatically, it is usually helpful if there is a rough plan that is presented so that people can respond to it. Each tradition should choose what they would like to do for their section, centered on a mutually agreed upon theme (for example, gratitude or service to others). The planning member(s) for each faith tradition should report to his or her constituency regularly, especially if a controversial issue arises.

Expectations: Members of the planning team and participants should understand that their own religious tradition will be respected and that this is not an attempt to replace their own worship. Rather, the gathering is for a specific, identified purpose (for example, a community crisis or celebration, an effort to educate people about differing religious perspectives, an attempt to include all members of the community and to affirm the various religious traditions). No one should be put in the awkward position of feeling pressured to compromise his or her own beliefs or values. This should not be a time for evangelism. That would be insensitive to people who come with an entirely different set of expectations. The audience should be invited to participate only to the extent that they

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[27]The apostle Peter did heal the lame beggar in Acts 3 "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (v. 6).

are comfortable.

Terminology: We avoid using "interfaith" because of the negative connotations the word has for many people. "Multifaith" or "interreligious" are both terms that seem to be less encumbered by negative associations. We do not use the term "worship," as this connotes something that may be antithetical for people from some religious traditions and may create specific and false expectations for people from any religious tradition. We want to communicate that this gathering is something different from the worship experience that occurs within their specific faith community. Where possible, we also avoid the use of the word "service," as this may have similar connotations to "worship," although the term is a convenient way to communicate the type of event (not a dialogue or debate, for example). We prefer to use "gathering," "experience," "celebration," or "commemoration" as one way to distinguish this multifaith event as a religious experience that is a different genre from their traditional, faith-specific worship.

Music, Silence, Dance: When music is acceptable to all of the planners, it can be a kind of universal language. Music is able to elevate the entire experience for everyone. Any variety of music that is suitable may be used (jazz, instrumental, solos, chorus). Music or silence can be a respectful way of transitioning from one religious tradition to another without seeming to run them together. If it is permissible, dance can be a powerful expression of emotion that wordlessly communicates the proper mood and tone.

Speakers: Clergy who are giving an address should speak unapologetically from their own faith tradition with appropriate allowances and sensitivity to the presence of those of other faiths.[28] Their language should be not esoteric but comprehensible to the general audience. The use of narrative is a powerful and nonthreatening way for people to communicate their beliefs. For instance, at a memorial service, students shared something that had helped them in times of grief. One student read some passages from the Bible that his family had read to his grandmother when she was dying the previous summer. The context of his family story made his reading far more meaningful than simply a straightforward reading of the text.

We believe that a limited use of multifaith services can make a valuable contribution to our building a respectful, pluralistic society where the importance to people of a God or gods is recognized. These services are especially appropriate for times when there is a need to bring the entire community together in mourning or celebration with a specific and clear purpose.

People from any group tend to be resistant to interaction with competing groups. That is true of people from different colleges, fans of different sports teams, and people of differing faiths and no faith. The most valuable motivator in bringing people together across religious traditions is the claims of one's own faith tradition. What are the teachings of the faith that encourage love for others and peace? Volf has talked about the need for communities of faith to have de-

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[28]Peter J. Gomes, "Baccalaureate Sermon," in William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds., *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp. 24–25.

fined but permeable boundaries that allow for and encourage significant interaction with the other that produces positive encounters.[29]

Conclusion

Since the purpose of this essay has been to look at how we can be sensitive to student needs in developing multifaith activities, I want to conclude with three principles that guide our thinking at Amherst College with regard to multifaith involvement. These principles are drawn from the three thesis points discussed in this essay and are represented in the acronym "RAM." Whatever we do, we want it to be respectful, authentic, and meaningful:

Respectful: The first thesis point is that "Religious students have a commitment to a set of beliefs, regulations, symbols, rites, and practices and want these particularities to be respected, appreciated, guarded, and understood in multifaith interactions." The first principle then is that we want to be respectful of each person's religious tradition so that no one is needlessly offended by things that are said or done. We do not want a participant to feel pressured to compromise key elements of his or her belief system or religious practice.

Authentic: The second thesis point is that, "Provided the first condition is met, religious students are eager to learn about and from the faith of others. This is especially true in informal settings and multifaith dialogue, as opposed to multifaith services." The second principle that follows from this is that we want to encourage each person who participates in multifaith activities to be authentic and true to his or her own beliefs and practices. While there are intrareligious differences, we want to assure that what others learn about each religious tradition represented is as accurate as possible and a genuine representation of at least the faith of the one who is leading.

Meaningful: The third thesis point is that, "Multifaith events are valued primarily for their educational benefit, cultural expression, and potential to deepen relationships." The third principle recognizes the reservations many people have about participating in multifaith activities. We want whatever we do to be significant and meaningful enough to justify pulling people together in a multifaith setting in spite of their reluctance to do so. We want to be sure there is a clearly defined purpose and reason for our gathering and that this purpose is best met by bringing different religious traditions together.

The three principles of "RAM"—respect, authenticity, and meaning—are an effective evaluation tool for multifaith activities. These three principles should be central to anything we do in multifaith programming and ministry. If they are, then we can be reasonably confident that what we do will be valuable and will provide positive reasons for people to attend. Multifaith events can and should play an important role in society in building bridges of understanding and deepening relationships between people of different religious groups.

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[29]Volf, "Voice," pp. 13–14.