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Critical Reflections on the Interfaith Movement: A Social Justice Perspective

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There is a burgeoning interfaith movement in U.S. higher education, inspired, in large part, by global events, and aimed at promoting tolerance of religious diversity. While there are various supporting arguments and approaches to this type of student programming, social justice oriented approaches—that is, approaches specifically centered around addressing systemic oppression and uplifting marginalized perspectives—remain rare. This lack of critical social justice reflection in the interfaith movement puts institutions at risk of alienating and/or further marginalizing religious minorities, despite intentions to do otherwise. In this article, I describe the current trends in the interfaith movement, reflect on them from a critical social justice standpoint, and envision a future for the movement that is more inclusive of, and attentive to, religious minorities. Specific critiques from a social justice perspective include (a) the lack of overt examinations of power dynamics and Christian privilege, (b) the tendency to ignore the sociocultural nature of religious identity, and (c) the frequent exclusion of non-Abrahamic religious groups.

Keywords: interfaith dialogue, Christian privilege, religious oppression, religious identity, social justice education

Interreligious conflict has existed throughout human history, and understanding it—its contexts, actors, and outcomes—is an important part of understanding our world and the people in it. Moreover, addressing and attempting to resolve this conflict is integral to achieving a peaceful global community. Yet, modern Western ideals of separating religion and government have caused many societies to shy away from dealing with issues surrounding religion in the public sector, especially in the realm of education (Marshall, 2010; Prothero, 2007; Wimberley, 2003). Nevertheless, around the world, scholars, educators, administrators, and policymakers are beginning to recognize the importance of integrating conversations about religion into our educational spaces. Here in the United States, for instance, there is a burgeoning interfaith movement taking place on college and university campuses. In large part, this

trend is a response to the ongoing religious violence internationally, and increasing religious tension domestically.

While curriculum, pedagogy, and programming intended to address religion and religious diversity in schools varies greatly, social justice oriented approaches remain rare. Thus, in this article, I describe the current trends for interfaith programming in U.S. higher education (their various manifestations and supporting arguments), and I use a critical social justice lens to reflect on and envision a future for this movement. Critical theory helps to focus attention on sociopolitical power dynamics between religious groups and the unique perspectives of religious minorities—that is, how might religious minorities experience or be affected by these various interfaith initiatives? Similarly, social justice education literature explains the importance of using curriculum and pedagogy as a transformative tool for advancing sociopolitical equity. As such, reviewing this body of literature from a critical social justice perspective is an attempt to bring oppressed religious groups/individuals into the center of our conversations about why and how to incorporate interfaith dialogue and programming into higher education in the United States.

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Why Talk About Religion at School?

Indeed, there is a growing movement to incorporate education about religious diversity and interfaith dialogue into our higher education curricula and institutional priorities. There are varying motivations for this, however. The three primary arguments supporting this movement found in existing scholarship are (a) the need to promote religious literacy among students/citizens, (b) the need to attend to students' identity development in a more holistic way, and (c) the need to broaden the discourse on diversity and multiculturalism.

Promoting Religious Literacy

The need to promote religious literacy, and thereby (in theory) interreligious harmony, is likely the foremost argument for the inclusion of interfaith dialogue in education. As Kung (1987) famously stated, there can be "no world peace without peace among religions, no peace among religions without dialogue between religions, and no dialogue between religions without accurate knowledge of one another" (p. 194). Unfortunately, however, our tendency to avoid education about religion has led to ignorance among the general population about the increasingly diverse religious landscape in which we live. Prothero (2007) called this phenomenon religious illiteracy and identifies it as a major problem in the United States. In 2001, the religiously charged terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, New York, along with the increased religious bigotry toward Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus that followed (Blumenfeld, 2006; Radomski, 2010; Takim, 2004), came as a wake-up call to educators and government officials around the world, and inspired a number of interfaith and intercultural initiatives. The Council of Europe, for example, immediately began developing a new strategic plan, one that would encourage all of its member countries to incorporate intercultural and interfaith dialogue practices into their public education (Halsall & Roebben, 2006; Wimberley, 2003). Doing so seemed to go against their own understanding of their role as a nonreligious international organization:

Religion is obviously a major dimension of cultural diversity. Why then was it not addressed for decades? There are two sources of this sensitivity. The first is

tradition: discussing religion in intergovernmental co-operation breaks a longstanding convention, reflecting deep respect for freedom of conscience and religion as well as the consensus support of the historic confessions for the European ideal. The second is that the Council of Europe is a public body, and as such remains resolutely neutral in the debate within and between religions about ultimate truths. (Wimberley, 2003, p. 200)

This statement illustrates how including issues related to religion in the public agenda is often conflated with promoting one religion over another (or over no religion), and thus, is discouraged—a sentiment that is common in Western countries, including the United States. Recently, however, scholars in the United States have been calling for inclusion of religion, spirituality, and interfaith dialogue into education and other public initiatives as a way to increase religious literacy and interreligious understanding (Kazanjian & Laurence, 2007; Marshall, 2010; Patel & Brodeur, 2006). Prothero (2007), for instance, explained that education about religion is essential to effective civic engagement and participation in public life.

Today, when religion is implicated in virtually every issue of national and international import (not least the nomination of Supreme Court justices), U.S. citizens need to know something about religion too. In an era in which the public square is, rightly or wrongly, awash in religious reasons, can one really participate fully in public life without knowing something about Christianity and the world's religions? (p. 12)

Perhaps even more importantly, Prothero (2007) described a number of ways (e.g., hate crimes against religious minorities, ineffective international diplomacy efforts, even unsuccessful negotiations between U.S. citizens and law enforcement officers) that religious illiteracy can actually be a matter of life and death.

It is for these reasons that an increasing number of educators are advocating for more attention to, and concern for, the development of religious literacy. Purposeful promotion of religious literacy in this way would help students not only to be well-informed citizens, but also to be more critical consumers of media messaging related to religion (i.e., less influenced by prejudiced generalizations) and to be more understanding (and less fearful) of the behaviors and practices of people from religious traditions other than their own (Gallagher, 2009).

Attending to Students' Spiritual Development

Another claim supporting the interfaith dialogue movement is that avoiding such dialogue neglects our responsibility to help facilitate students' spiritual development. In this context, the term spiritual (or, spirituality) typically refers to one's individual quest to understand the interconnectedness between internal and external realities (Spirituality in Higher Education, n.d.), which is often related to or influenced by one's religious background and orientation. Indeed, "growing disillusionment with religious institutions in western society" has caused many to separate spirituality from religion (Hill et al., 2000, p. 58). Nevertheless, Hill and colleagues (2000) explained (after acknowledging the range of definitions used for each term) that because the sociological and psychological overlap among religion and spirituality are so substantial, social science research attempting to understand notions of identity and experience related to either or both should avoid treating the two concepts as if they were unrelated (Hill et al., 2000).

Given the complexity of these terms, in addition to the hesitance around discussing religion in the public sector (described above), research into, and our understanding of, this aspect of college students' identities and experiences has, until recently, been minimal. In 2003, to address this lack of knowledge, the Higher Education Research Institute launched a nationwide longitudinal study¹ that sought to provide data on college student religious/spiritual identities in the United States, and to examine the extent to which their time in college facilitated their spiritual development. The project, which ended in 2010, found that 83% of college students identify as religious and affiliate themselves with a religious group, and that 80% of college students are interested in exploring their spirituality (Spirituality in Higher Education, n.d.).

Dozens of publications have been produced using these results,² (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Bryant, 2006; Bryant & Astin, 2008), through which authors have argued that spirituality and religious dialogue are essential components of higher education. Findings suggest that spirituality is extremely important in most students' lives, and for that reason, educators

need to pay more attention to students' spirituality and internal selves, while also attempting to teach them about the world and their external realities. The project's principle investigator, Alexander Astin (2004), noted,

What is most ironic about all of this is that while many of the great literary and philosophical traditions that constitute the core of liberal education are grounded in the maxim, "know thyself," the development of self-awareness receives very little attention in our schools and colleges, and almost no attention in public discourse in general or in the media in particular. If we lack self-understanding—the capacity to see ourselves clearly and honestly and to understand why we feel and act as we do—then how can we ever expect to understand others? (pp. 34–36)

Beyond the Higher Education Research Institute study, the 2000s saw a massive increase in scholarly literature calling for student affairs professionals (in particular), faculty, and administrators to support students' spiritual (individual) development and to make higher education a welcoming environment for the exploration of religion (cultural/group phenomenon) and interfaith dialogue (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm Auerbach, 2006; Ingram, 2007; McCarty, 2009; Nash, 2001; Seifert, 2007; Small, 2009; Tisdell, 2003). This new discourse on spirituality in education emphasizes the need to recognize students' religious identities as a legitimate part of their overall selves and to treat their curiosity about religion as a legitimate part of their college learning process. Facilitating students' individual spiritual development in this way then also makes interfaith dialogue and interreligious understanding more fruitful, because, as Panikkar (1999) asserts, one cannot begin to understand another religious tradition until they understand their own—or at least their own interpretation of it.

Broadening the Discourse on Diversity and Social Justice

A final, less acknowledged reason for engaging students in interfaith dialogue is the need to include religious identity into our discourse on diversity and social justice. In the United States, education (particularly higher education) has attempted to address social inequalities by es-

¹ <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/>

² For a full list, see: <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/publications/academic-articles/>

tablishing policies and initiatives that seek to foster diversity on campus and increase social justice for disadvantaged groups. Yet, such efforts have not been made to the same extent for religious minorities.

According to education historian John R. Thelin (2004), the first call for reorienting higher education toward issues of minority equity and access came in 1971 from the government commissioned *Newman Report*, which pointed out the system's lack of attention to the increasingly diverse student population. However, substantial changes in governance and operations on college campuses were not realized until the 1990s, when larger social movements began to demand recognition and equality for minority racial groups, women, and lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals (Thelin, 2004). In particular, campus-based multicultural programming and curricula sought to advance voices and issues from marginalized racial minorities, as racial tension throughout the country was rampant in the 1990s (Engberg, 2004; Patel, 2012). Today, racial tension and inequality persist, which colleges and universities are continuing to confront. Likewise, there are increasingly well-established campus movements and academic disciplines for addressing gender and sexual orientation issues, fueled by ongoing social injustice for women and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer community.

Despite the advances that have been made in the last several decades with regard to issues of identity and social justice, there has been relatively little headway in the effort to understand and address religious identity and oppression (Blumenfeld, 2006; Patel, 2012; Schlosser, 2003). In view of that, Nash and Scott (2009) have suggested that incorporating education about religion and religious difference into our systems of higher education is the "the next logical step for enlarging the meaning of cultural pluralism and diversity" (p. 132). Doing so would push students, educators, and administrators to understand the concept of multiple perspectives on a whole new level (Nash & Scott, 2009).

Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), believes that the emphasis on racial diversity in higher education has had a positive impact on race relations in our society, and is optimistic about the potential for campus-based interfaith work to alleviate religious tension in a

similar way. According to Patel (2012), if colleges and universities were as deliberate about, and attentive to, issues of religious diversity as they have been about issues of racial diversity, we would see a drastic change in the way religious minorities are viewed and treated in this country.

I'm pretty convinced that one reason Barack Obama is president is because of the 1990s-era multiculturalism movement on campuses. A generation of college students caught a vision of what a multicultural nation should look like—and those were the people who staffed the moon-shot Obama campaign. Imagine the impact a 21st-century campus interfaith movement would have on the nation over the course of the next 30 years. Perhaps we will not be Googling "Sikh" when we hear of a hate-fueled murder in Milwaukee; perhaps we'll be electing a Sikh president. (Patel, 2012, para. 11)

The interfaith movement Patel (2012) spoke of is certainly making its way into the realm of higher education in the United States. However, just as there are differing reasons for encouraging interfaith dialogue or interaction in higher education, there are varying manifestations of this type of programming. While not all of them include formal dialogues between students from different religious backgrounds, the label "interfaith dialogue" is often used rhetorically when describing the range of interfaith student programs or services.

Current Trends in Interfaith Student Programming

As described above, many scholars have supported the idea of including lessons and learning opportunities about religion and religious diversity in education (particularly higher education), especially in the last decade or so. While there are various ways individual colleges and universities have chosen to implement this idea, I have identified three general trends in current models of interfaith student programming based on my own involvement with campus-based interfaith programming over the last five years, conversations with colleagues doing similar work at other institutions, observations from relevant presentations at academic conferences, a review of the available scholarly literature on this topic, and a survey of institutional and organizational websites describing their interfaith initiatives: (a) interfaith community service programs, (b) multifaith spirituality cen-

ters, and (c) facilitated dialogues between religiously diverse students.

Interfaith Community Service Programs

The predominant form of interfaith engagement found on college campuses attempts to create opportunities for students to have positive interactions with peers from other religious groups through service projects and other extra- or cocurricular activities (Patel & Brodeur, 2006). In the rhetoric surrounding this model of interfaith programming, the term “interfaith dialogue” is often used, with the claim that through bringing students from different religions together in this fashion, interfaith dialogue occurs organically. However, formal dialogue is not emphasized in these programs (so, I choose not to label them as dialogues at all). Instead, interfaith community service programs attempt to help students build interfaith relationships (thus, presumably reducing their fear or bias toward religious others), by engaging religiously diverse students in collaborative projects that highlight their shared value (religious or otherwise) of helping others.

This model of interfaith engagement is heavily promoted by IFYC, and with an increasing number of partnerships in colleges and universities across the country, they have built quite a bit of momentum around it. Community service projects as an interfaith engagement strategy is a trend that has also been fueled by *The President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge*,³ which was introduced by President Barak Obama in March, 2011. Within one year of the launch of this presidential call to action, over 250 new interfaith initiatives were formed on college and university campuses around the country, all organized around community service as a means of advancing interfaith collaboration (The White House, Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, n.d.).

According to Patel, as stated in IFYC’s podcast, “What Is Interfaith Literacy?”, the solution to interfaith conflict and prejudice is simply to build appreciative knowledge of other religions and being able to identify shared values with individuals from different religious identities (Interfaith Youth Core [IFYC], 2013). The interfaith service program strategy seeks to do exactly that. For example, after participating in

an IFYC conference, Elmhurst College’s then-president reflected on the interfaith initiatives (he refers to them as dialogues) at his own school (Ray, 2010). Among them, he describes encouraging students to work with Habitat for Humanity and organizing various interfaith services and rallies against poverty and gun violence. A service-related event like this, Ray (2010) explained, “brings religious and nonreligious students together in the service of the homeless and communities lacking adequate facilities” (p. 45). Indeed, such efforts are commendable and likely do contribute positively to the communities and people involved. Nevertheless, it should be noted that they do not actually ensure dialogue about religion between religiously diverse students. Labels like “interfaith collaboration” or “interfaith engagement” are appropriate in this case, but certainly not “interfaith dialogue.”

Multifaith Spirituality Centers

Another approach to interfaith programming that is common on college campuses is to create multifaith spirituality centers—also called interfaith centers, interfaith prayer rooms, and meditation rooms, among other names. These centers typically host events such as multifaith panel discussions, religious festival celebrations, or interfaith prayers. In this way, campus-based interfaith centers often serve as a space for students to explore their spirituality through learning about their own and other religious traditions. At Wellesley College, for instance, the Multifaith Center (attached to the campus’ chapel) is home to their Religious and Spiritual Life Program. This program is guided by a team of chaplains and religious advisors, as well as a multifaith student council, that assists in developing campus-wide campaigns to inspire students, staff, and faculty members to engage in interfaith dialogue and increase their appreciation of religious diversity (Kazanjan & Laurence, 2007). The emphasis at Wellesley is on celebrating the traditions of all religious groups on campus, and by doing so, educating the campus community about the different religious identities that make up their college. Addition-

³ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/obnfp/interfaithservice>

ally, they staff chaplains⁴ from a range of religious traditions and facilitate opportunities for students to receive pastoral counseling if they so desire.

Similarly, the University at Albany's Interfaith Center features an interfaith meditation and prayer room, an interfaith library, an outdoor labyrinth, and a meditation garden.⁵ The Center organizes various interfaith meals, field trips, workshops, and speaker series, often facilitated by chaplains and religiously affiliated student groups. Despite a lack of academic publications describing this type of programming in more detail, a web search for "campus interfaith dialogue" or "campus interfaith program" will surely produce numerous links to campus interfaith centers describing initiatives much like those at Wellesley College and University at Albany. These types of spaces and events on college campuses are certainly useful in providing exposure to a range of religious traditions and, in that way, can help students achieve a basic level of religious literacy (which can make interfaith dialogue more effective). However, as much of the activities that take place within these multifaith centers lack formal dialogue between individuals with differing religious identities, "interfaith dialogue" is, again, an inaccurate label; perhaps "multifaith education" should be used instead.

Facilitated Interfaith Dialogues

Formalized, facilitated interfaith dialogues represent a final version of interfaith programming found in colleges and universities in the United States. These range from less structured to highly structured, but all bring together students from different religious backgrounds to discuss their respective beliefs, traditions, and/or experiences. A less structured approach to facilitated interfaith dialogue includes the types recommended by IFYC, such as "pop-up conversations" (creating a space for people to drop in for a brief interfaith conversation) or "speedfaithing" (like speed-dating, where participants spend a few minutes talking one-on-one with each other person in the group) events (IFYC, n.d.). In dialogues like these, students show up voluntarily and exchange information about themselves to a peer(s) with a different religious identity. These casual conversations, guided by students' own interests, curiosities,

and comfort levels, allow students gain exposure to other religious beliefs/traditions and to ask questions about religion they may not feel comfortable doing elsewhere.

More highly structured interfaith dialogues are typically sustained for longer periods of time (once a week for an entire term, for instance), and are more closely guided by one or more trained facilitators. At the University of Michigan, for example, the Intergroup Dialogue Program offers semester-long discussion-based courses where facilitators lead students through discussions about issues pertaining to a single social identity chosen for the class. Among other identity themes, religious identity dialogue courses are offered where students learn to examine their own religious socialization, and the structural privilege or oppression they and their peers experience (Dessel, Masse, & Walker, 2013). The University of Michigan's model of interfaith dialogue places less (if any) emphasis on religious belief or ritual, and more on comparing the lived experiences of religiously diverse students based on the cultural and social nature of religion.

Intended outcomes of facilitated interfaith dialogues vary, from increased knowledge and friendship potential to increased awareness of religious stratification and inequity. All of them, however, are different ways of attempting to address religious conflict and improve interfaith relations. Formalized interfaith dialogues (in contrast to interfaith community service programs or interfaith prayer services) seem, for the moment, to be the least common form of interfaith programming found on college campuses. Nevertheless, they are becoming more widespread as the interfaith movement grows.

A Critical Social Justice Approach

While all of the approaches to interfaith programming described above certainly seem like positive steps toward interfaith harmony, there are some potential negative consequences that become apparent when analyzing them through a critical social justice lens. The critical social

⁴ See Clark and Brimhall-Vargas (2003) for a discussion on why the use of the word chaplain to refer to religious advisors from non-Christian traditions is indicative of Christian privilege.

⁵ <http://www.albanyinterfaithcenter.org/>



justice perspective asserts that an examination of power and privilege are important in any dialogue about identity (religious or otherwise) to prevent the further marginalization of subordinate identity participants. Many of the interfaith initiatives described above fail to do so. This is not to say that they should not be utilized at all, or that they all must be changed to strictly adhere to a critical social justice agenda. However, considering certain possible areas of weakness that a critical social justice perspective elucidates would help practitioners within the campus interfaith movement be more mindful of the ways religious minority participants may be affected by the initiatives they pursue. Before detailing the specifics of a critical social justice reflection on the current trends in interfaith programming, however, I must clarify what a critical social justice perspective is.

The term *social justice* itself often means different things in education rhetoric, as North (2006) detailed. Still, social justice education might be simply described as a philosophy of education designed to teach students about the various forms of inequality and oppression, and, in turn, to promote equity and the larger social justice vision. Much of the theoretical foundation for this body of literature is grounded in critical theory, including the subfields of critical pedagogy and critical identity studies. If you trace the literature on social justice back to its philosophical origins, you will find that it is rooted in the works of Hegel, Marx, and other German scholars of the 1800s. It was Hegel (1807/1977) who first combined traditional philosophy with an evaluation of current political and economic policies and Marx (1848/1964) who famously analyzed class conflict in light of sociopolitical power dynamics. Drawing from these ideas, Horkheimer (1972) explicitly developed critical theory as a unique theoretical perspective with a primary concern for satisfactory life conditions for all people. Thus, through situating philosophical reflection in the context of sociopolitical history, coupled with an emphasis on human wellbeing, we can understand critical theory as a foundation of current day literature on equity and social justice. As Rasmussen (1996) explained, critical theory was born out of the realization that “theory, when allied with praxis has a proper political end, namely, social transformation” (p. 12).

The adoption of a critical theory perspective in the field of education is commonly known as critical pedagogy. With his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1968/2000), used Hegel’s and Marx’s critical philosophies to describe critical pedagogy as a transformative, social justice oriented approach to education. While Hegel’s and Marx’s writings were situated in the context of class oppression and workers movements in Germany, Freire wrote about the impact of class oppression on education in the context of poor, rural Brazil. Ultimately, however, Freire’s description of critical pedagogy served as a guideline for a system of education designed to facilitate the liberation of all systemically oppressed groups, not just the poor and working class. Since the initial publication of his book in 1968, scholars and practitioners from around the world have adopted his ideas to advocate for the liberation of many other oppressed identity groups. Thus, Freire’s work, and other scholarship on critical pedagogy (e.g., Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1998), laid a strong foundation for understanding how education can also be used to liberate religious minorities from systemic social oppression.

Distinctive subfields of critical theory have also emerged to analyze power dynamics with regard to a number of different identity groups: race, gender, sexuality, ability, among others. For instance, critical race theory positions philosophical reflection about racial identity in the context of the sociopolitical history of White supremacy in this country (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). In the same way, feminist theory examines gender identity in the context of the context of our country’s history of male domination—social, political, and economic (hooks, 2010). When it comes to religious identity, however, there remains a dearth of literature, certainly not an entire field of study, dedicated to philosophical analyses with a similar critical lens. Nevertheless, there is a growing community of scholars, and a growing body of scholarship, that represent a critical perspective to analyzing religious identity (Adams & Joshi, 2010; Blumenfeld, 2006; Clark, Brimhall-Vargas, Schlosser, & Alimo, 2002). These authors argued, as I do, that religion is socially constructed identity (rather than a set of personal beliefs) that is shaped by the past and present structural domination of Christianity—

also known as Christian supremacy (Todd, 2010)—in the United States.

Discussing religious identity with a critical social justice orientation requires careful consideration of the historical, social, political, and legal power imbalance between religious groups. Just as White and male hegemony have hindered people of color and women, so too has Christian hegemony in the United States caused the social and institutional oppression of religious minorities—including internalized oppression, whereby subordinate group members view themselves as inferior due to the normalization of the dominant group (Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012; Lipsky, 1977).⁶ While it may be easiest to think about incidents of interpersonal discrimination toward religious minorities as the primary manifestation of religious oppression, critical theory reminds us that “invisible systems conferring unsought social dominance” of one group over another is far more prevalent and detrimental to marginalized groups than “individual acts of meanness” (McIntosh, 1998, p. 151). Thus, a critical social justice approach to philosophical analyses of religious identity and oppression contextualizes experiences of religious identity within the historical backdrop of Christian cultural domination.

A common opinion about religious identity is that individuals can choose and change that aspect of themselves at any time. Yet, as many scholars have explained, the religion that one adheres to, is most familiar with, and/or is most comfortable with is largely a matter of the way that individual is socialized (Adams & Joshi, 2010; Durkheim, 1912/1995; Eliade, 1969; Harro, 2010; Smith, 1991; Tisdell, 2003). In that way, religious identity is not simply about personal choice.

Our socialization begins before we are born, with no choice on our part. No one brings us a survey, in the womb, inquiring into which gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, cultural group, ability status, or age we might want to be born. These identities are ascribed to us at birth through no effort or decision or choice of our own. (Harro, 2010, p. 46)

Moreover, according to Tatum (2010), a person’s identity throughout their life is developed by “Integrating one’s past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self” (p. 6). Thus, if we recognize that religious identity is socially constructed, and we keep in mind that experiences of privilege and/or oppression can-

not be erased (Tatum, 2010), we can understand that individuals may continue to experience privileges or oppression associated with the religious culture of their upbringing, even if they no longer subscribe to certain specific beliefs associated with that religion. In other words, one’s spiritual (personal, individual) beliefs may change, but their previous religious socialization and inherited religious (group, cultural) identity can still affect their worldview, their lived experiences, and their societal interactions. Even if one chooses to transition to a new (or no) religious affiliation in adulthood, the religious socialization that shaped their upbringing remains a part of their worldview and their overall self. As Brimhall-Vargas (2011) explained in his phenomenological study of religious conversion, “even when the external features of the religion are in alignment with a person’s new internal beliefs, the old identity is still present as a nagging point of reference” (p. 76). Therefore, while it is possible for a person to eventually assimilate into a new religious culture (and identity), doing so often requires many years of dedicated self-examination and community support; one does not switch from a privileged position to an oppressed position (or the other way around) in an instant. Social, familial, and cultural influences can make religious identity much more complex, and much more deeply engrained, than a simple checklist of spiritual beliefs.

This perspective—that religion is largely cultural and that affiliation with a religious culture has little to do with one’s individual beliefs—aligns with characterizations of religion put forth by prominent scholars in the field of religious studies (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Eliade, 1969; Smith, 1991). Indeed, Durkheim (1912/1995) warned us against defining religion (or religious affiliation, or religious identity) according to beliefs alone, because some religions do not even espouse a specific set of beliefs. He admitted that it may be tempting for those from religious traditions that do emphasize belief to define religion in that way, but warns that doing so would be reflective of their own biases and

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this article to address internalized oppression to the extent that it deserves. The works cited here provide additional discussion on this important issue.

preconceptions about what religion is in the first place.

Echoing this sentiment, Smith (1991) suggested that what we think of as religion should be separated into two things: “an historical ‘cumulative tradition,’ and the personal faith of men and women” (p. 194)—which is similar to the separation between religion and spirituality I make above. One’s personal faith (or, spirituality) may change over time, even day to day. One’s socialization into an historical, cumulative tradition (or, religious identity), however, has implications for culture and worldview that are separate from belief. After all, even “the modern man who feels and claims that he is nonreligious still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals” reminiscent of their religious culture (Eliade, 1959, pp. 204–205).

Combining the emphasis on historical inequity and political power imbalance with the understanding that religious identity is culturally and socially constructed, a critical social justice approach calls for interfaith practitioners to acknowledge religious socialization and examine systemic religious oppression. Applying this approach to our work within the interfaith movement can help us think about how interfaith programming can increase equity for oppressed religious groups, and when there may be the potential for just the opposite.

Critical Reflections on the Interfaith Movement

Reflecting on the interfaith movement in U.S. higher education from a critical social justice perspective raises a number of concerns about how the movement may be alienating or even further marginalizing individuals from minority religious traditions. While there are undoubtedly good intentions motivating most campus interfaith practitioners, and there are surely many positive aspects of existing interfaith initiatives, there are elements of the movement that fail to address key issues related to religious conflict, prejudice, and oppression. Interfaith programs that overlook Christian privilege and religious oppression might make participants, particularly those from the dominant group (i.e., Christians), feel gratified by the experience, but may not make any substantive steps toward social justice for religious minorities. Three primary critiques of this movement from a critical social justice perspective are (a) a lack of ex-

plicit examinations of Christian privilege, (b) a tendency to overlook the socioculture nature of religious identity, and (c) the frequent exclusion of non-Abrahamic religious groups/individuals.

Recognizing and Challenging Christian Privilege

An essential component of critical theory is the recognition and examination of power and privilege. Thus, acknowledging and purposefully challenging Christian privilege is a necessity for critical social justice oriented interfaith dialogues, just as critical dialogues about race should examine White privilege and critical dialogues about gender should examine male privilege (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). To this point, however, the interfaith movement in higher education has not prioritized examining Christian privilege. In part, this may be because Christian privilege itself is a fairly new concept. In 2002, Clark and her colleagues introduced the idea, relating Christian privilege to the concepts of White privilege and male privilege made famous by Peggy McIntosh (1988, 1998). They described it as, “an invisible set of unearned and unacknowledged benefits with which Christians in the U.S. walk casually around” (Clark et al., 2002, p. 54), and they adopted McIntosh’s (1988) famous list of White privileges to relate specifically to religious identity. A few examples from this list include the following:

- It is likely that state and federal holidays coincide with my religious practices, thereby having little to no impact on my job and/or education.
- I can share my holiday greetings (e.g., Merry Christmas, Happy Easter, etc.) without being fully conscious of how it may impact those who do not celebrate the same holidays.
- My religion and religious holidays are so completely “normal” that, in many ways, they may appear to no longer have any religious significance at all.
- I can deny Christian privilege by asserting that all religions are essentially the same.
- The elected and appointed officials of my government are probably members of my religious group.



- I can openly display my religious symbol(s) on my person or property without fear of disapproval, violence, and/or vandalism. (Clark et al., 2002, pp. 54–55)

Since that initial introduction to Christian privilege, several other scholars have also joined the conversation (Adams & Joshi, 2010; Blumenfeld, 2006; Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2008; Case, 2013; Schlosser, 2003; Seifert, 2007). However, there are still many scholars who overlook, are skeptical of, or even deny the existence of Christian privilege. For instance, Kimmel and Ferber's (2010) *Privilege: A Reader*, which included sections on male, White, heterosexual, and class privilege, did not address Christian privilege at all. There is a mention of anti-Semitism in one chapter (Sacks, 2010), but primarily in the context of racial, non-Nordic prejudice rather than as a discussion of religious oppression. Others, such as Nelson (2010), are expressly uncomfortable with the full list of Christian privileges, and assert that Christians are also oppressed.⁷ He critiqued, in great detail, the explanation of Christian privilege that Clark et al. (2002) put forward, claiming that in secular settings like schools, Christians find themselves stifled from full expression of their religious identity (Nelson, 2010). Larson and Shady (2012) extended that perspective, claiming that Christians are also marginalized by the media and secular public. Still others flat out reject the idea of Christian privilege, suggesting that what some think is Christian privilege, is really just White privilege. Stewart and Lozano (2009), for example, argued that people of color who are Christian do not benefit from Christian privilege because they often do not fit in with White Christian congregations, a claim that disregards the experiences of non-Christians altogether.

That the legitimacy of Christian privilege is debated, even by those who are self-proclaimed social justice scholars, has likely limited the development of a critical social justice perspective in our discourse about campus-based interfaith initiatives. Unfortunately, this may be preventing the interfaith movement from addressing the bigotry and oppression that religious minorities are experiencing on the very campuses they are operating from. Recently, the nationwide Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate survey found that religious minorities are more acutely aware of religious con-

flict at their schools than Christian students, and experience more negative interactions with, and feelings of coercion from, peers with different religious identities (Bryant Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2014). Still, most of the interfaith programming in U.S. higher education that is described in peer-reviewed journals, at academic conferences, and on institutional websites does not directly question, address, or analyze the religious stratification at the root of these conflicts and differences in perspective.

A critical social justice approach to interfaith engagement contends that without adequately acknowledging and managing the drastic power imbalance between different religious groups, educational programming that deals with religion and religious identity can be damaging to religious minority students who may perceive the initiatives as hollow attempts to assuage them, while not actually addressing their marginalization (Seifert, 2007). Thus, interfaith programs aiming to be social justice oriented should overtly insert activities, lessons, and other curricular or pedagogical tools demonstrating the existence of Christian privilege. Moreover, they should attempt to inspire positive social action toward rectifying the imbalance and injustice created by the historical and political Christian hegemony in this country. While there is a dearth of literature (both theoretical and practical) that discusses how to successfully pursue or facilitate this type of interfaith dialogue, models of social justice oriented race and gender dialogues, such as Intergroup Dialogue (Zúñiga et al., 2007), can be adopted for this purpose. Strategies like ensuring substantial participation by non-Christians, having a Christian and a non-Christian cofacilitate the dialogue, and training facilitators to recognize manifestations of Christian privilege during the dialogue process can all be used to promote a critical social justice agenda through interfaith dialogue.

Indeed, there are some colleges and universities that are pursuing interfaith engagement from a critical social justice perspective (or, at least attempting to). Those that are not, however, may not

⁷ While it is true that some Christians express feeling oppressed (just as some White people and men also do), a critical social justice perspective analyses power dynamics between religious groups within historical and political contexts, and asserts that dominant group members may experience interpersonal acts of meanness or exclusion, but do not experience societal level oppression.

recognize the ways their religious minority participants might be further marginalized through their programs. For example, if Christian participants are dominating the conversation (in essence, exhibiting their Christian privilege) and facilitators fail to intervene and make space for non-Christian participants to speak uninterrupted, religious minorities may come away from the dialogue feeling disregarded and unappreciated (Edwards, 2016). Similarly, if Christian participants suggest that they are oppressed—either by claiming that Christians are oppressed, or by changing the subject to discuss a different identity for which they are oppressed—and facilitators do not step in to ensure that Christian privilege and religious oppression are validated and recognized, non-Christian participants may interpret that their oppression as religious minorities does not matter (Edwards, 2016). Of course, the goal should not be to silence Christian participants; rather, discussions should be reframed to help all participants recognize the historical context and reality of Christian domination. Failure to do so, despite good intentions, may put an interfaith program at risk of reinforcing Christian hegemony without realizing it. Unfortunately, as Gorski (2008) explained, when it comes to conversations about culture and power, good intentions are often not enough.

Some interfaith programs even claim social justice as a tenet, yet still do not align with a critical social justice perspective on religion or religious identity. The interfaith efforts at Elmhurst College (described above) are an example of that. Undeniably, bringing a religiously diverse group of students together to build houses for economically disadvantaged families or raise awareness of gun violence is “critically informed work toward social justice” (Ray, 2010, p. 44). These are not, however, forms of social justice work that specifically help religious minorities. Recognizing which form of oppression to target is an important aspect of a critical social justice approach to interfaith engagement. As such, attention to religious identity oppression and Christian privilege specifically is invaluable for the interfaith movement.

Acknowledging and Reflecting on the Sociocultural Nature of Religious Identity

Beyond recognizing and challenging privilege, another important aspect of the critical social jus-

tice approach is acknowledging and reflecting on the socially constructed nature of identity. However, in current manifestations of the interfaith movement, religious identity is often spoken about as a personal set of beliefs, where individuals are identified according to their own self-chosen religious label. While self-identification is certainly a strongly held value in critical identity paradigms, *carte blanche* self-identification can also prove problematic when attempting to address identity oppression. For instance, when Rachel Dolezol, a White woman born to two White parents, identified herself as Black, critical scholars decried her chosen identity label as racial appropriation and a hindrance to the social justice efforts of the Black community (Caldera, 2015). Thus, as explained above, from a critical social justice perspective, one’s upbringing and identity socialization needs to be recognized as a part of their identity label—whether the individual wants to admit it or not.

It is for this reason that interfaith dialogue (or interfaith programming in general) seeking to adopt a critical social justice approach should focus not on “individual dimensions of faith and belief, but on the societal role of religion in justifying and helping to maintain a social system characterized by religious domination and subordination” (Adams & Joshi, 2010, p. 228). While social justice oriented interfaith dialogue may (or may not) share and compare participants’ beliefs, traditions, or values, it should certainly ask students to reflect on their own religious socialization, how it is shaped by Christian hegemony, and how it affects their lived experiences. It is possible that an interfaith dialogue of this sort may not actually spend any time at all discussing individual participants’ spiritual beliefs or the beliefs espoused by the religious tradition with which they were raised. After all, enjoying school closures on your religious culture’s holidays (or, conversely, having choose between school and your religious holidays) does not require you to personally believe anything in particular.⁸ In other words, experiences of privilege or oppression often have more to do with the way Christianity

⁸ According to a Pew Research Center (2013) poll, 87% of atheists and agnostics in the United States celebrate Christmas, substantially more than the percentage of religious minorities who do so. While this research does not mention what (if any) religious background these atheists and agnostics have, it does demonstrate that Christian holidays are celebrated as part of a Christian-normative culture, regardless of individuals’ beliefs.

shapes societal norms, assumptions, and routines than the specific details of people's spiritual beliefs.

Asking participants to examine their own religious socialization often means that those who prefer to label themselves as atheist or agnostic will have to acknowledge the way they are culturally affiliated with a religious tradition—that is, acknowledge their sociocultural religious identity. For instance, if a participant was raised in a Christian family and in a Christian social environment, and thereby was taught to see the world through a Christian lens, he or she should be asked to recognize and learn about their Christian privilege, even if they no longer believe in the tenets of Christianity and no longer chose to call him- or herself a Christian. Similarly, if a participant was raised as a Muslim, has an entirely Muslim family, and attended a religious Muslim school all of their lives, he or she should be encouraged to reflect on the way their Muslim cultural identity has shaped, and continues to shape, life experiences, even if he or she has recently adopted a new set of beliefs. Two atheist participants, then, if one was raised as a Christian and the other as a Muslim, have entirely different levels of religious privilege/oppression and, therefore, have entirely different perspectives to offer in an interfaith discussion. **An interfaith program focused solely on participants' individual beliefs overlooks this reality and misses an opportunity to examine how Christians (even those who are only Christian by culture) are afforded privileges that religious minorities are not.**

Critically examining the sociocultural aspects of religion is important to do, not just in theory or in rhetoric, but in practice as well. Research has shown that even programs following the overtly critical University of Michigan Intergroup Dialogue model may stray from its social justice mission if/when facilitators' and students' do not adequately understand the critical perspective on religion and religious identity (Edwards, 2016). When this happens, it becomes possible that interfaith dialogue can, unfortunately, perpetuate the marginalization of religious minorities and further embed their internalized oppression. A critical social justice framework encourages us to consider how power imbalances between religious groups might affect the way religious minorities experience these programs. So, when programs ask

participants to explain their religion to others, as speedfaithing events or pop-up conversations might do, **it is important to recognize that doing so may place disproportionate pressure on participants from lesser-known and lesser-understood religions traditions to articulate (and sometimes defend) their religion to their peers.**

Hindus, for instance, may find themselves in a position where they have to rationalize the concept of reincarnation or the existence of multiple deities, while their Christian peers are not likely to encounter such bewilderment at the idea of a single lifetime or god (Blumenfeld et al., 2008; Edwards, 2016). Likewise, when programs organize educational lectures or panels of religious leaders, they run the risk of leaving audience members exposed to only a single interpretation of a given religion—a risk that threatens minority religions more than larger, more common religious groups. That the vast majority of Americans are Christian makes the diversity within the Christian tradition more widely acknowledged, a privilege that is not afforded to most minority religions whose adherents are often assumed to hold a singular belief system or practice. Furthermore, when programs are run by chaplains and in campus chapels (even if they are labeled as interfaith or multifaith spaces), partner with local houses of worship, involve religious ritual (such as an interfaith prayer), or are centered on personal religious exploration, the entire experience is foregrounded in a context of religious belief, and may exclude those who do not believe in a higher power. It is equally important, however, for atheists and agnostics to engage in interfaith dialogue and to learn about how embedded Christian hegemony is in our society, especially because many of them may still have a cultural worldview and identity rooted in the religious tradition of their upbringing.

To be sure, belief is a big part of the way most people understand religion, despite some of the foremost authorities on religious studies explaining that religion and religious identity is much more complex than that (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Eliade, 1969; Smith, 1991). Focusing solely on belief in an interfaith dialogue makes it possible for culturally Christian atheists to ignore their Christian privilege and the way they benefit from a system that oppresses religious minorities by presenting themselves as separate from the dominant culture. Additionally, it cen-



ters conversations about religious minorities on their beliefs rather than their subordination. A dialogue of this sort does not align with the priorities of the critical social justice paradigm.

Religious Identity Inclusion Beyond the Dominant Abrahamic Traditions

Another aspect of interfaith programming that can be perceived as hollow or insincere to some religious minority students is the bias toward Christianity or the three dominant Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) in much of the existing discourse and practice. Again, this may be a result, in part, of the lack of education research and literature addressing non-Abrahamic religious groups. Much of the existing scholarship intended to help student affairs professionals address issues related to religion or spirituality with students is written from a Christian perspective, is based on research about Christian students, or has “lumped students of all religious groups into a categorical definition aligned with mainstream Christianity” (Small, 2011, p. 4). The influential faith development theory (Fowler, 1981), for instance, which claims to separate faith and religion, defines and describes students’ spiritual development from a Christian perspective (James Fowler was, notably, a Christian minister and theologian). To address this problem, Watt, Fairchild, and Goodman (2009), organized a special issue of the journal *New Directions for Student Services* to help push the field beyond its Christian orientation. However, in this special issue they attend only to Jewish, Muslim, and atheist students; no other religious identity is represented or discussed. In fact, in the introduction to the special issue, the editors list only Islam, Judaism, or atheism as nondominant belief systems (Watt et al., 2009).

Small (2011) also attempted to broaden theoretical literature in this area by developing a three-tiered hierarchy of religious privilege. Yet, she, too, only recognizes Christians, Jews, Muslims, and atheists. While she acknowledges that Christians have the highest level of privilege in the United States, she claims that Jews and Muslims are more privileged than atheists because they fit into the predominately religious society of the United States and have a shared connection to Christians as members of the Abrahamic spiritual lineage. Beyond her failure

to recognize sociocultural nature of religion, non-Abrahamic religious identities are completely missing from this model. Where would a student who practices Native Hawaiian religion fit? A Jain? A Taoist? In explaining her choice to put Jews and Muslims in the second tier of religious privilege, Small (2011) quoted a research participant who says,

we all pray to the same source. . . . I mean besides. . . . Judaism and Christianity and Islam are all. . . . Abrahamic religions, they all pray to the same God, just . . . have a different name for God and have different views on who Christ was. (p. 113)

What about those who do not believe in the God of Abraham at all? Small complicates her own model by suggesting that Evangelical Christians often face oppression because of their religious identity and thus, are at once both privileged and oppressed. Yet, she does not question the way various denominations of Judaism or Islam are privileged/oppressed differently.

Countless other authors contributing to discussions on religion, religious identity, and interfaith issues in higher education have also ignored non-Abrahamic religious traditions (Fowler, 2004; Ingram, 2007; Nash, 2001; Roozen & Hadsell, 2009; Zúñiga & Sevig, 1997). Similarly, the discourse about religious oppression, even in recent publications, is often not inclusive of all religious minorities; the term *anti-Semitism*, which refers only to prejudice against Jews, is commonly used in place of the catch-all phrase, *religious oppression* (Maxwell, Nagda, & Thompson, 2011; Rodriguez, Rodriguez-Scheel, Lindsey, & Kirkland, 2011). Even the influential text by Adams et al. (2010), *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, referred to religious oppression as anti-Semitism in their first edition back in 2000. The complete title of the first edition was *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Anti-Semitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism* (Adams et al., 2000). Clearly, the theories and frameworks for understanding religious oppression need to be more inclusive and better understood.

Slowly, academic publications are beginning to acknowledge the existence of non-Abrahamic religious identities (Adams & Joshi, 2010; Blumenfeld, 2006; Clark & Brimhall-Vargas, 2003). However, in many cases (not all), these acknowledgments come in the form of a brief comment, much like a footnote,

whereas the bulk of the discussion and description covers issues pertinent to the three main Abrahamic religions primarily. Also, while some religious traditions are recognized (Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Native American religions are most often mentioned) others are still largely untouched; for example, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Paganism, Wicca, Voodoo, and many others. To be sure, the smaller number of Americans who identify with these religions contributes to the lack of data U.S. researchers are able to produce relevant to these identities. Nonetheless, it is necessary to call attention to the more privileged positions that religious traditions more well-known by the general U.S. population enjoy in this country so as not to simply pay lip service to religious diversity, but to make a genuine effort to incorporate all religious identities into this discussion.

A critical social justice approach to interfaith dialogue reminds us that it is important to include individuals (both participants and facilitators) and perspectives from non-Abrahamic traditions—not as a token, in the form of a single participant, but as well represented and valued religious groups. At the most basic level, an interfaith program that only involves or acknowledges Jews, Christians, and Muslims is an affront to the very existence of other religious groups. It should come as no surprise, then, that many students felt extremely offended when the University of Maryland embarked on its Tree of Life⁹ interfaith needlepoint project and only invited participants from the three dominant Abrahamic traditions. Their rationale was that the Tree of Life was a central symbol in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—neglecting to mention that the Tree of Life is also a theme in Buddhism, Hinduism, and virtually all indigenous religions.

On a more systemic level, excluding non-Abrahamic perspectives limits participants' exposure to different religious traditions, which may lead to a false sense that all or most religions share certain ideas and principles found primarily in the Abrahamic traditions (monotheism, a sacred text, weekly rituals that take place in particular holy building, among countless others). Perpetuating this myth reinforces the Abrahamic yardstick as a measure of religiosity, or even a determinant of what constitutes a religion (as opposed to merely a form of

spirituality, as some might suggest). Participants from non-Abrahamic religions may be forced, then, to justify their tradition as an actual religion—a struggle that indigenous peoples, Buddhists, and others often face. From a critical social justice standpoint, this exemplar of Christian (maybe even Abrahamic) hegemony should be challenged in an interfaith dialogue. Doing so requires substantial participation by individuals with non-Abrahamic religious identities—not to teach others about their traditions, but to broaden the conversation beyond Judeo-Christian-Islamic normative themes. Indeed, asserting a marginalized, misunderstood perspective can be daunting when one is alone, or in the extreme minority. For that reason, it is crucial that non-Abrahamic religions are well represented in an interfaith discussion or event.

To be sure, organizing an interfaith dialogue (or other interfaith initiative) with adequate participation from a wider range of religious identity groups can be a difficult task, but it is important nonetheless. A commitment to social justice often means spending more time and effort recruiting participants from underrepresented identity groups, and an interfaith dialogue is no different. What the critical social justice framework helps us understand, in this case, is that simply including two or three religious identity groups in an interfaith dialogue is not enough to truly combat systemic religious oppression; that it is also necessary to include, in a considerable way, those outside the three dominant Abrahamic religions. Of course, there may be reasons for limiting interfaith dialogue to just two or three specific groups—for instance, when the goal is to address the unique historical tensions between those groups. However, programs attempting to reduce prejudice toward, and promote inclusion of, religious minorities more generally, should avoid such a lack of diversity.

The Future of Interfaith Engagement in Higher Education: A Critical Social Justice Vision

Despite the critiques of the interfaith movement I present above, I do see great potential in

⁹ https://www.facebook.com/TreeOfLifeUMD/info/?tab=page_info

campus-based interfaith initiatives as a means for reducing interfaith tension and prejudice—not only on college campuses, but in our society as a whole. My hope, however, is that a critical social justice framework becomes further embedded into the discourse and practice of interfaith work, to ensure that religious minorities are not further marginalized by these programs. This vision for the future of interfaith engagement in U.S. higher education includes five specific recommendations, all designed to orient the interfaith movement toward positive social change.

First, when an interfaith program endeavors to be social justice oriented, all participants (students, staff, and faculty members alike) should clearly understand, from the start of the process, exactly what that means; in other words, they should expect Christian privilege and religious oppression to be central themes of their discussions. Second, interfaith initiatives should help participants understand the difference between religious identity (one's sociocultural, group identity) and religious/spiritual belief (one's individual faith), and why discussing religious identity is more important when the end goal is justice for religious minorities. Third, if social justice is a stated priority, participants should commit to discussing structural power dynamics and sharing lived experiences as members of their sociocultural religious group, rather than using the dialogue to debate spiritual, theological, or philosophical matters. Fourth, facilitators, coordinators, and anyone else in charge of guiding an interfaith program should be critically self-aware of their own religious identity (and their associated privilege/oppression); this includes being familiar with the ways power imbalances between religious groups manifest both interpersonally and in society at large. Lastly, participant demographics in interfaith initiatives should reflect diversity across multiple (although not necessarily all) non-Christian and non-Abrahamic religions, where no one participant is left to represent their religious group alone.

This last recommendation is certainly the most difficult to follow. Given the sheer number of distinct religious traditions that exist (in the world, in the United States, and on most college campuses), it would be impossible to have every one of them represented at any given event. Additionally, because facilitating meaningful

interaction among participants can get complicated when the group is too large, trying to construct an appropriately diverse group that is also appropriately sized can be quite challenging. I do not claim to know the perfect solution to this predicament. Perhaps further research and theoretical contemplation can help shed more light on this issue. For now, I simply urge that we think critically and deliberately about the composition of our interfaith dialogues (or other interfaith initiatives), keeping in mind that (a) religious minorities may be unfairly burdened if they are the only participant with their religious background, and (b) individuals with non-Abrahamic religious identities (Dharmic religions, indigenous religions, etc.) often have worldviews and experiences with marginalization that differ greatly from religious minorities from the Abrahamic traditions.

Undeniably, social justice work is difficult, and requires constant reflection and reevaluation. My intention here is not to reprimand or ridicule any of the programs or institutions mentioned throughout this article. Instead, my goal is to inspire those committed to social justice to analyze their own processes, critically consider how religious minorities are affected by them, and find ways to improve the initiatives they are involved with as needed. Just like Patel (2012), I, too, believe that the interfaith movement in higher education has the ability to shape the future of interfaith relations in this country. Beyond current models, however, we need a nationwide paradigm shift that places our greatest attention on the least recognized and understood religious groups. An interfaith movement with a critical social justice approach quite possibly may turn the tide of interfaith relations away from violence and intolerance, toward acceptance and harmony.

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