

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Why this 'None' is going to divinity school

By **Katie Gordon** Program manager,
Kaufman Interfaith Institute



Katie Gordon is the program manager for Kaufman Interfaith Institute.

This Insight is my final piece working for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. Having been the program manager for the last four years and a college intern before that, the interfaith community across West Michigan has become my own community.

However, the time has come for me to build community elsewhere, and that place will be Harvard Divinity School in Boston. This fall, I will begin studies on religion, politics and ethics through its Master of Theological Studies program, learning alongside students of all religious, spiritual and philosophical backgrounds.

So in this final piece, I wanted to answer the question that many of you have asked me over the last four years: Why do I, as a non-religious person, do interfaith work? And more relevant to my current plans, why would a nonreligious person go to divinity school?

As I have written previously, I am one of those millennial "Nones," a term that Pew Research coined to include the more than one in three people younger than 30 who are atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious, and basically anyone who would check on a form "none of the above" in regard to religious or spiritual identity.

Being a "None" who convenes and facilitates religiously diverse interfaith gatherings, my secular identity often has come up. Almost always the reaction is surprise and confusion. "But, if you're not religious, why are you interested in religion?" Or phrased differently, "If you don't have a faith, why would you be involved with interfaith?"

I never felt the need to ask myself this question until I moved to Grand Rapids. In my undergraduate studies, while certain stereotypes existed against atheists, I was never questioned as to why I was in such spaces. In my religious studies and political science classes, it was clear why I and my secular counterparts cared about learning about religion. Religion, spirituality, and faith were important to us — not only in our political activities nationally and internationally, but in people's lives — in their activism, organizing and careers.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD

For me, it was obvious: religion still matters. It was important for me to understand the traditions and followers in order to understand the world I am a part of. It makes my study of history, politics and activism deeper and more authentic to the human experience, of which religion is such an integral part for so many individuals and communities.

While I may not be a person of faith, I am a part of a world where faith is an active dynamic affecting all of our lives. To engage with interfaith was a way of appreciating this aspect of existence, with an emphasis toward the lived experiences of people's stories of faith as well as the doctrines that shape our lives and institutions.

Over these four years of organizing interfaith efforts in West Michigan, our dialogues and service projects did more than teach me new things about religious traditions. Each conversation, each relationship, quickly invoked a sense of "holy envy" in me. A term from Krister Stendahl, the former dean of Harvard Divinity School, holy envy is the recognition of something so beautiful in another person's tradition that you wish to reflect it in your own tradition.

Realizing how deepening I found interfaith work to be, both personally and professionally, I sought to continue this formation through divinity school.

But this leads to a second question you may be asking: Why does a divinity school let in someone who does not necessarily believe in the Divine? What even is divinity school?

To many people's surprise, divinity school is about much more than training future pastors and ministers. Most notably, Harvard Divinity School and many other leading schools have programs that intentionally reflect the religious and nonreligious diversity of our country. Harvard has theological and ministry initiatives around all religious traditions, not just the Christian tradition.

Further, more and more atheists and spiritual seekers are attending divinity school out of a desire for grounded, morally rooted education toward careers in activism, social work and community organizing. Instead of the pulpit, these leaders are taking their divinity school skills into the streets, political offices, non-profit groups and more.

Specifically, I chose Harvard Divinity School, which just marked its 200-year anni-

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versary, because its leaders are on the forefront of the conversation around the future of religious life in America. This is a future that they recognize not only includes the secular, the spiritual and the seeking, but it is a future that needs these voices in particular to shape our society and communities that will serve all.

It is in this space that I wish to bring my experiences learned from Grand Rapids over the past four years into a place where we can imagine what the future of our shared public life looks like — across the religious, spiritual and secular diversity that too often divides us. After all, in the enduring words of civil rights leader Vincent Harding, we live in a time that calls us "to see visions of life beyond the old boundaries, to search out the new common ground."

I hope to continue to be a part of this conversation beyond the old boundaries and seeking out new common ground, both continuously in Grand Rapids, and in my new home in Boston.

Interfaith@gvsu.edu