

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Navigating, acknowledging Christian privilege

John Luke Hawkins *Kruizenga Interfaith Ambassador at Hope College*

Editor's note: John Luke Hawkins is a recent graduate from Hope College in Holland, where he was the first Kruizenga Interfaith Ambassador from January through May. This position was created through a generous contribution from alumnus Richard Kruizenga to promote interfaith understanding at Hope College. One of the goals was to foster an inclusive campus for all faiths at this Christian college where most students self-identify as Christian. It is the goal that all students will be respected regardless of faith tradition and that every student will learn in a diverse and accepting environment.

I was sitting in a Grand Rapids coffee shop talking interfaith. The discussion was on the rise of religious hate crimes across America: the Mosque bomb threats, the vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and the shooting of a Sikh man.

As someone relatively new to the inter-



John Luke Hawkins is a 2016-17 interfaith intern. This is part of a series of column by the interns.

faith world, I asked: "A hate crime against a Muslim individual is due to Islamophobia. What are hate crimes against Jewish individuals labeled as...Jewishophobia?" Though there was some comedy in the statement, it was also telling of my privilege, specifically through my identity as a Christian.

Over this past year, I have spent a lot of time and energy in understanding privilege and what that means for me. In a recent journey surrounded by diversity, injustices and new world views, I came to understand my privilege as a white, middle-class-raised, able-bodied cisgender male. Recently, I have realized the need to add "Christian" to that list of privileged place holders.

In the context of the United States, the

privilege that comes with being a Christian is not discussed often in Christian circles. In fact, it is usually the opposite: "It is hard being true to one's Christian faith in a secular day and age," or "No one said being a Christian is going to be easy." Though there are truths in those statements, it is more comfortable being a Christian in the United States than a person of another faith.

Look at the holidays that are widely celebrated, such as Christmas, Easter or St. Patrick's Day — all are rooted in the Christian faith. In Holland, many downtown stores are closed on Sunday, and people commonly read their bibles in public spaces such as coffee shops.

This is not to suggest that these stores need to be open on Sundays, the United States should not have Christmas as a public holiday or people should not be allowed to read their bibles openly. Rather, there is a high degree of comfort with being a Christian in the United States, and there is not enough conversation around that societal privilege.

Is the Hindu celebration, Holi, a federal holiday? Do West Michigan downtowns close on Saturday for the Jewish Sabbath? Can a Muslim man wear his traditional garments and read the Quran in a coffee shop without apprehension of how he will be perceived?

Do Christians need to ask those same types of questions about their own faith traditions in the United States?

Returning to the opening story in which I said "Jewishophobia": At the time of that conversation, I did not know the term "anti-Semitism." Hate crimes against Jewish individuals had not been on my radar previously because they had not affected me due to my Christian identity. Yet, in diving into the question of privilege, other individuals' burdens also need to be our own.

It has been said that privilege is invisible to those who have it. Being a Christian is a privileged position in the United States, and that has to be acknowledged in order to create a place where interfaith engagement can thrive.