FOUR

The Vision of Interfaith Leadership

Interfaith cooperation means many things to many people. Here are some of the more pointed views I have come across in recent years:

- *At a meeting of highly respected religious leaders, I rattle off the diverse identity groups involved in Interfaith Youth Core programs. When I get to humanists, one leader stops me and says, "Wait, did you just say that you've got people who don't believe in God involved in your organization? Isn't the purpose of interfaith work to unite believers against nonbelievers, especially now, in an era of advancing secularism?"*
- *In the question-and-answer session following my speech at a small college in the Midwest, a young woman stands up and asks, "How long do you think it will take interfaith work to achieve its goal of ushering in a postreligious society?"*
- *At a dinner with progressive Christians in New York City, someone comments that the political alliance between Jews and evangelical Christians regarding Israel is fascinating. The face of one of the dinner guests grows dark and stormy. She*

exclaims angrily, "An alliance dedicated to injustice can never be truly interfaith."

- *At the benefit event for a significant Jewish institution in Chicago, I am introduced to someone as a person who builds interfaith cooperation on college campuses. She says, "Oh, so you are doing something to stop the bigots running anti-Israel campaigns!"*
- *After a talk at a progressive church in Portland, a woman stands up, joins her palms in a form of prayer, and asks, "At what point in your interfaith journey did you learn that all religions were true and one? When do you share this wisdom with others?"*
- *In a conversation with a Muslim at a conference on Islam, he says, "When during your interfaith work do you invite people into the one right religion—Islam?"*
- *During a session with campus leaders at a public university in Utah, where the population is 85 percent Mormon, someone suggests an idea for an interfaith program: returned Mormon missionaries should give presentations about their missions to religiously diverse audiences in addition to Mormon groups. This way the Truth will be heard by many kinds of people.*
- *Right after this person speaks, a woman stands up and says she loves interfaith work because it recognizes that there is no such thing as a single capital "T" Truth, but instead many small "t" truths.*

As you can see, not only are these definitions different, they are in conflict with one another. People on both sides of various divides see the term "interfaith" as a vehicle for their view. When pro-Israel folks hear the term "interfaith," they think, "Support for Israel." When critics of Israel hear "interfaith," they think, "Criticism of Israel." Committed theists who are concerned with the rise of the numbers of nonreligious want interfaith to be about uniting believers to defeat nonbelievers. Nonbelievers who are concerned with the influence of religious voices often want interfaith to be about eradicating religious belief.

The first thing to say about this is that it is par for the course. When people with diverse religious identities gather under a banner as nebulously defined in the public imagination as "interfaith" is, it should come as no surprise that they bring their own meanings to the term, and that those meanings represent their particular identities, views, and biases.

An interfaith leader ought to look at this situation the way a mountain climber looks at a mountain. The first reaction is not, "Hey, how did *that* get there?" It is, "I *came* to climb this mountain."

Similarly, when an interfaith leader realizes that there is confusion and conflict in the room, including about the meaning of the term "interfaith," the adrenaline should start pumping and the excitement should grow. You prepared for this; it is a natural part of the landscape. What do you think interfaith work is but a gathering of people with diverging views on matters of ultimate concern? And if the first issue up for discussion is the meaning of the term "interfaith," is it any surprise that the diverse views and identities people carry get projected onto that?

The problem interfaith cooperation seeks to solve is precisely the one highlighted by the conflicting definitions people bring to the term—how to get people with opposing religious views in a democracy to engage positively. In the metaphor of bridges and landscapes, this chapter describes the place on the landscape of religious diversity where the bridge of interfaith cooperation leads, a place called pluralism.

PLURALISM

As discussed earlier, Harvard scholar Diana Eck makes a hugely useful distinction between the term "diversity" and the term "pluralism." Diversity, she claims, is simply the fact of people with different identities interacting with one another. In and of itself, diversity is neither good nor bad; it is simply a demographic fact.[1] Diversity can be very positive; imagine the variety of people who came together to fight for civil rights in mid-twentieth-century America. It can also turn into something highly destructive. Consider the conflicts between different religious identities over the past half century in the Balkans, South Asia,

Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and Central Africa. When diversity turns in a negative direction, it is generally characterized by prejudice, discrimination, and conflict, the barriers and bludgeons I wrote about in chapter 2.

Pluralism, on the other hand, is the energetic engagement of diversity toward a positive end. Where diversity is a fact, pluralism is an achievement.

In the same vein, the Jesuit theologian and political philosopher John Courtney Murray further defines pluralism thus:

> [The strength of pluralism is in] the coexistence within the one political community of groups who hold divergent and incompatible views with regard to religious questions—those ultimate questions that concern the nature and destiny of man within a universe that stands under the reign of God. Pluralism therefore implies disagreement and dissension within the community. But it also implies a community within which there must be agreement and consensus. There is no small political problem here. If society is to be at all a rational process, some set of principles must motivate the general participation of all religious groups, despite their dissensions, in the oneness of the community. On the other hand, these common principles must not hinder the maintenance by each group of its own different identity.[2]

The examples that opened this chapter provide a useful illustration for key concepts in the theories of Eck and Murray. The various definitions of the term "interfaith" highlight the *diversity* gathered, including the *divergent* and *incompatible* views people within the group held. For this diversity to achieve *pluralism*, an interfaith leader has to *engage* the group in a manner that accommodates the deeply held identity differences and the inevitable conflicts these differences imply, while at the same time building *agreement, consensus, and general participation* in *the oneness of the community.*

These concepts have helped me develop a three-part framework for pluralism: respect for identity, relationships between different communities, and a commitment to the common good.

Respect for Identity

Respect for identity has three main parts. The first is that people have a right to form their own identities regarding religion, or anything else for that matter. They can be believers or nonbelievers, Christians or Muslims, Sufis or Salafis. Moreover, they can be pro–gay marriage, black feminist Christians or anti–gay marriage, black feminist Christians.

Second, people have a right to express their identity. They can pass out flyers about their views at the bus stop. They can form civic associations that nurture their patterns of believing, behaving, and belonging. And they can seek to influence politics—voting for particular candidates, raising money for favorite causes, running for office on their chosen platform—in the direction of their identity-based views.

Third, people's identities should be reasonably accommodated. This means everything from adequate facilities for the observance of various religious practices, to a basic education about the diversity of identities within a society.

To respect someone else's identity does not require you to agree with it or to accept it. A Muslim who believes that Muhammad is God's final prophet can respect a Bahá'í without accepting Bahá'u'lláh as a prophet. That Muslim, if she is the facilities manager at the company where that Bahá'í works, needs to provide reasonable accommodation for his prayers and recognize that he might wish to express his faith by offering a lunch-and-learn discussion in the company cafeteria. In my view, she ought to attend this presentation to learn more about the Bahá'í tradition. She can disagree with a part of Bahá'í doctrine and still learn to appreciate other dimensions of the tradition, for example, the beautiful architecture of Bahá'í temples.

Relationships Between Different Communities

In a diverse society, if people have the right to both form and express identities, those various identity expressions will undoubtedly find themselves in conflict, as indeed they do in our own diverse society. Respect is fundamental in this situation, but I do not think it is sufficient. It is easy to imagine a situation where the Muslim facilities manager

grudgingly allows the Bahá'í to place his scriptures on his desk and in the common library of the company (certainly if other scriptures like the Bible and Qur'an are available there), yet maintains a chilly distance in all other relations. Multiply that scenario across identity groups and you have the definition of tribalism and a recipe for conflict.

If the chief virtue in our diverse society is respect for identity, we are in danger of becoming a nation where people accommodate those with whom they disagree but have little else to do with them. They keep their most substantive conversations only within circles of the like-minded. When there is a serious disagreement on a principle with public implications—abortion, same-sex marriage, Middle East politics—on which one group decides it cannot respect a divergent view, the absence of relationships means the potential for conflict is high.

Even if violent conflict does not actually erupt, grudging respect and chilly distance between identity communities is not a particularly inspiring vision for a diverse society. It views diversity as a problem to be mitigated rather than a good to be approached with warm, if considered, embrace. That is one reason that building relationships between diverse communities is a second key principle of pluralism. By "relationship," I mean positive, constructive, warm, caring, cooperative engagement. This takes the form of conversation, activity, civic association, and friendly contact. It almost always involves some dimension of concern for the other's well-being. These are not connections based on the fiction of total agreement across all dimensions of identity, but rather engagement in full awareness that there are areas of both commonality and divergence and a commitment to care for one another in recognition of both.

Let me illustrate with a simple, relatable example. My wife's parents are moderately observant Muslims. For many years, they lived in a Chicago suburb next to an evangelical Christian family who homeschooled their three girls. At first, the two families were pleasant to each other but had little contact. Things changed when, after Eid prayers one year, our two sons were running around in their grandparents' backyard and the girls next door poked their heads over the wooden fence and invited them to play. Our boys whooped happily and went. This,

of course, meant all of us adults—my wife and me, and my wife's parents—trooped across the driveway, knocked on the door, and properly introduced ourselves to the neighbors. We collectively overheard a fascinating interfaith conversation in the backyard, our oldest son, Zayd, explaining that he got out of school today to celebrate Eid, a holiday that Muslims believe in because we believe in the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. The neighbor's oldest daughter responded that they go to school at home so they can follow a Christian curriculum because they believe in Jesus and the Bible. We adults shifted uncomfortably, knowing full well the doctrinal issues at stake. "Looks like someone learned something in religion class this week," somebody commented, allowing nervous laughter to break out.

The interfaith conversation in the backyard continued, the kids sharing back and forth about their religions, including the differences and contradictions. None of the adults stepped in to stop it; the things that were being said were true, and important. I think we probably all felt a little flush of pride that our kids were proud enough of their religions to speak about them openly to strangers. The adults chose to relate on different things.

"How often do your kids come here?" the woman next door asked my wife.

"About once a month or so," my wife said.

"Please send them over to play. My girls really want playmates and your boys are so sweet. Hey, I just made muffins. Can I offer you some?" she asked.

We, of course, said yes. My mother-in-law responded that there was going to be plenty of food left over from our Eid feast; she would bring some by later.

Over the next several years, lots of baseball was played between the kids, many baked goods were exchanged, recommendations for the best local plumbers were shared, and a handful of interfaith conversations (mostly between the kids) were had. When Chicago experienced record-breaking cold, my father-in-law felt more comfortable leaving for an out-of-town business trip, knowing that his wife would be looked after in case of frozen pipes or a dead car battery, because of

the relationship with their neighbors. When the woman next door had to run out to get something from the grocery store, my mother-in-law would watch her kids for a few minutes. The common concern of caring for children of a similar age webbed together a relationship characterized by friendly conversations, neighborly niceties, and shared activities. Years later, when my wife's parents sold their home and moved away, one of the most poignant moments was their tearful good-bye with the evangelical Christian neighbors.

This is precisely the ethic that Jeffrey Stout speaks of in *Democracy and Tradition*, the "thick democratic practices" of conversation and activity across lines of difference that help to build a civic nation out of what might otherwise be a random gathering of people.[3] One can imagine a situation where these two households showed respect for one another's religious differences without the added dimension of warm relationship. It is certainly possible to accommodate someone's prayer practices yet refuse to let your kids play at their home. But it sure feels less inspiring.

Commitment to the Common Good

By common good, I mean the principles and structures of the broader entities we all live within, the "oneness of the community" that John Courtney Murray highlights. Committing to the common good means recognizing that our various identity expressions and relationships can only exist when those principles and structures are healthy. This refers to both highly concrete and extremely abstract matters. If the principle of free expression is eroded, all of our identities are threatened. If violent gangs roam the streets, getting to a PTA meeting where relationships between people who have different views on the Middle East can be built is more difficult. Simply put, the common good are those principles and structures that a range of groups benefit from and people generally agree we have a collective interest to uphold.

Of course, this all is made more complicated by the fact that people's identities shape their vision of the common good. People in favor of gay marriage speak about upholding the common good values of equal

rights, dignity, and freedom. People opposed to gay marriage speak of the common good value of how marriage has been understood and practiced in Western civilization for centuries. But both views exist within a broader political community that allows free expression, civic and political associations, and an open legal system, and in a broader society with safe air travel, well-paved roads, and excellent communications systems. All identity communities have a stake in maintaining some version of the common good, some notion of the health of the whole.

One striking example of people with divergent views based on different identities finding common ground is the "You Stink" campaign in Lebanon.[4] Between 1975 and 1990, different religious groups waged a brutal civil war in that country, killing 120,000 people and forcing a million more to flee. The major political institutions are still deeply divided between religious groups, as is much of the social and economic life. In the summer of 2015, the various groups found something that brought them together. Trash was piling up across Beirut, creating an unpleasant smell and a health hazard. An organized effort called the "You Stink" campaign emerged. People from a range of religious communities put aside their divisions and animosities to gather together and peacefully demand that the trash be picked up. It is a potent example of how, even in a nation where diverse communities have a recent history of violence and deep current divisions, there are opportunities to identify and work toward some definition of the common good.

THE CIVIC GOODS OF INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP

The definition of pluralism is drawn largely from political philosophy. It is an attractive destination but, in keeping with the finest traditions of philosophy, a somewhat abstract one. Like the notion of "a more perfect union" in the Preamble to the US Constitution (another phrase from the pen of a political philosopher), it can be approached but never finally reached.

The upside here is that even heading in the direction of pluralism provides significant benefits, what I am calling the five civic goods of

interfaith cooperation. These goods are derived from the social sciences, disciplines that generally seek more concrete outcomes than its cousin in the academy, political philosophy.

In continuing with our metaphor of building a bridge toward the destination of pluralism, it is reasonable to ask why anyone would take the time to build a bridge to a place that can never be arrived at. The answer is that the landscape becomes far more beautiful along the way. By moving toward the vision of pluralism, and building your bridge to reach that destination, you get to see the benefits of the following five civic goods:

1. *Increasing understanding and reducing prejudice.* Prejudice is the irrational dislike of certain identities, frequently race, gender, sexuality, disability, and/or religion. Prejudice is bad in a diverse society because it violates the dignity and rights of the target person or group, and also because it raises barriers to their contribution to the broader society. Contributions by citizens are the lifeblood of a democracy. Interfaith leadership facilitates the flow of contributions by increasing understanding of diverse identities and thereby reducing the barriers erected by prejudice.
2. *Strengthening social cohesion and reducing the chances for identity-based conflict.* I define "social cohesion" as the broad inclusion of people with different identities and positive relationships between them. Identity-based tensions and conflict are a significant problem in diverse societies. Social science evidence (see the discussion of Varshney in chapter 2) shows that social cohesion helps prevent such conflict. By accommodating diverse identity expressions, nurturing positive relationships between different communities, and upholding the broader community we all live within, interfaith cooperation strengthens social cohesion and also creates the conditions for bridging social capital.
3. *Bridging social capital and addressing social problems.* "Social capital" is generally defined as well-organized networks of

people whose energy is directed toward civic ends. Religious communities are the largest source of social capital in the United States. By bridging the social capital between diverse religious communities and channeling it toward a positive civic purpose, interfaith leaders have the opportunity to make a profound impact on social problems ranging from poverty to disease.

4. *Fostering the continuity of identity communities and reducing isolation.* We live at a time when identity communities across the board are losing members. While I am certainly not arguing for people to be forced to join or stay in communities against their will, Robert Putnam and David Campbell offer evidence that people who are part of such communities are both healthier and happier.[5] Moreover, such groups serve as the building blocks of social capital. Religious groups have long been one of the most important identity communities in the United States. Social scientists like Peter Berger and Christian Smith believe that an important reason for the erosion of such communities is because of the challenge they face in positively engaging diversity.[6] Interfaith leaders help faith and philosophical communities endure by providing them with a framework and language that helps them positively articulate their own identity in a diverse society, while at the same time building positive relationships with the various people around them.
5. *Creating binding narratives for diverse societies.* As mentioned earlier, in his paper "*E Pluribus Unum*," Robert Putnam highlights the central role that grand narrative plays in binding together the various identities in a diverse nation.[7] The idea of America as an immigrant nation and the prominent place of *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one) on the Great Seal of the United States gives people of various backgrounds a sense of place and belonging in the United States. In "Civil Religion in America," the sociologist Robert Bellah highlights how religious symbols play an especially powerful role in such narratives.[8] Some of the most enduring images of the United States—Winthrop's "city on a hill," Lincoln's "almost chosen people,"

> Addams's "cathedral of humanity," King's "beloved community"—have roots in religious texts and narratives. National symbols like the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance absorb some of these religious qualities. When used properly, these symbols can be utilized in a national narrative that communicates that the diversity within a nation is sacred and, thereby, ought to be cherished, protected, and positively engaged.

To be clear, these are not the *only* benefits associated with interfaith cooperation, just the most prominent civic goods. They fall under what might be called the "good neighbors" paradigm of interfaith work rather than the "fellow seekers" model, which highlights the more personal and spiritual dimensions of interfaith engagement. While the majority of this book emphasizes the civic rather than the personal, the good thing is that one does not have to give up the latter to gain the former. Indeed, as I explained in chapter 1, interfaith leadership is both a fulfilling personal journey and a way to make significant social impact.

THE INTERFAITH TRIANGLE

How does an interfaith leader know that she is building the bridge in the right direction, toward the destination of pluralism? This question brings up the thorny issue of how interfaith leaders measure their effectiveness at the same time they are running their programs.

There are at least two challenges with measuring the effectiveness of social programs. The first is accuracy. Measurement in social programs has to use proxies. The questions on an IQ test are a proxy for intelligence. The SAT exam is a proxy for how prepared a student is for college work. Neither of these is a perfect measure for the complex phenomenon that is intelligence or college readiness, but they are reasonable proxies, and the people who run them are constantly seeking to improve the instruments.

The second challenge in measuring the effectiveness of social programs is the burden involved. The evaluation effort should be reasonably easy to administer and analyze, and should definitely not take

more time and energy than running the actual program. (The exception to this is when professional evaluators or academic researchers design a large-scale study intended to research one or more of the effects I've discussed.)

In creating an evaluation that is a reasonable proxy for the objectives I sketched out *and* that is easy to administer, it is useful to rely on the work of the experts. Social scientists measure America's religious diversity in three basic ways. The first and most common category is attitudes. This is a broad category, and there are many ways to ask questions about attitudes, but it generally comes down to a pretty basic sentiment: "Do you feel warmly toward Muslims, Jews, evangelicals, or humanists?" The second category is relationships. These are the "Do you know, work with, or have a friend from a different religion?" questions. The final category is knowledge. These are the "What religion is Shabbat associated with? In what faith do adherents fast from dawn to dusk for one month of the year?" types of questions.

The three measures are related, with an especially strong correlation between relationships and attitudes. Consider the following statistics. A 2007 Pew study found that 44 percent of people who *did not* know a Mormon had a positive attitude toward the Mormon community. Of those who *did* know a Mormon personally, *60 percent* had favorable views. That's a sixteen-point difference. The same question was asked regarding Muslims, and there the difference was even starker. Only 32 percent of people who *did not* know a Muslim expressed favorable views toward the community. But of those who *did* know a Muslim, 56 percent had positive attitudes. That's nearly a twenty-five-point difference.

In *American Grace*, Putnam and Campbell call this the "My Pal Al" principle, and explain it with this example: Say you are a beekeeper and your friend Al is a beekeeper. Apiculture brings you together, and through this shared activity, you learn that Al is an evangelical Christian. Prior to meeting Al, you harbored a host of prejudices about evangelicals, but if Al is a beekeeper and a good guy and an evangelical, then maybe other evangelicals aren't so bad. Putnam and Campbell actually show strong statistical evidence for this principle—that people's regard

for entire religious groups improves through a positive, meaningful relationship with even one member of that group, often formed through a common activity.[9]

The data suggested something else as well: that by becoming friends with Al, the beekeeping evangelical, not only did your attitude toward evangelicals improve, so did your attitude toward Mormons and Muslims get better. Putnam and Campbell conclude: "We have reasonably firm evidence that as people build more religious bridges they become warmer toward people of many different religions, not just those religions represented within their social network."[10]

There is also evidence that knowledge of other traditions correlates with positive attitudes. A 2009 Pew study found that those who reported a high familiarity with Islam—for example, knowing that Muslims call God Allah and call their holy book the Qur'an—are three times more likely to have favorable views of Muslims than those who report low familiarity.[11] A Gallup survey released the same year found a similarly strong correlation between knowledge of Islam and attitudes toward Muslims.[12]

But it's not just any knowledge that matters; it's the type of knowledge that counts the most. Princeton University's Robert Wuthnow found that Americans regard Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims as equally strange.[13] But twice the number of Americans say Muslims are fanatical. Why? Because the information they have on Muslims tends to be about extremist violence.

I think it is useful to view attitudes, knowledge, and relationships as three sides of a triangle, what I call the "interfaith triangle." If you know some (accurate and positive) things about a religion, and you know some people from that religion, you are far more likely to have positive attitudes toward that tradition and that community. The more favorable your attitude, the more open you will be to new relationships and additional appreciative knowledge.

The three sides of the interfaith triangle directly map onto the three parts of pluralism. Attitudes are a reasonable proxy for respect for identity, and knowledge is a decent proxy for understanding. Taken together, they can be viewed as measuring the absence of overt prejudice

and the presence of positive understanding, the first of the five civic goods of interfaith cooperation. Relationships are a direct measure for, obviously, relationships.

But how can an interfaith leader measure more sophisticated civic goods, like social capital and social cohesion? To get at the answer to this question, it is useful to view the interfaith triangle as something people cycle around. As the attitudes-relationships-knowledge virtuous cycle gains steam, initiatives like interfaith service projects and mosque-synagogue-church exchanges become more widespread. This grows social capital, strengthens social cohesion, encourages people to remain within identity communities, and gives people a deeper appreciation for a national narrative that highlights the holiness of religious diversity.

The interfaith triangle is meant to be a reasonably accurate and easy-to-use evaluation model for interfaith leaders. Once you know that appreciative knowledge and meaningful relationships are connected to positive attitudes in the shape of an interfaith triangle, and that attaining a virtuous cycle around the interfaith triangle helps us achieve the higher-level objectives, you can design programs to maximize for knowledge and relationships. And you can create easy-to-analyze surveys that you administer to program participants, asking if they learned something that inspired them about a different religion or if they met someone they admired from another community. When respondents answer with an emphatic yes, your bridge is probably heading in the right direction. If they don't, then you might need to change some things.

CONCLUSION—OF MOUNTAINS AND ELEPHANTS

In concluding, I want to return to some of the themes I raised at the beginning of this chapter regarding religious diversity being about gathering people who disagree on ultimate concerns. It is impossible to overstate how real, and how challenging, this is. To return to the mountain metaphor, the climber should not be surprised that the mountain is present, but she is certainly justified in looking at it up close and personal and feeling daunted.

Because interfaith programs are often wrapped in a kind of feel-good gauziness, when the mountain of disagreement finally shows itself, it can seem especially rocky. I remember moderating a panel with two students at Alvernia University, one an atheist and the other a Catholic, who proudly proclaimed to an audience of their fellow students that their religious difference meant very little. They had the same politics, viewed social issues in similar ways, even liked the same music. Their message seemed to be that religious differences don't have to be scary because they don't mean all that much. Toward the end of the discussion, the atheist made an offhand comment that if he ever had children, he would be sure to expose them to all religions and philosophies, instead of just raising them in one. That, he said, was tantamount to child abuse. The young Catholic woman sitting to his left, who needless to say had been raised for her whole life as a Catholic and likely planned to raise her children in the same way, looked like she had seen a ghost. The pretense that different orientations around religion had no consequential implications collapsed just like that, in a moment of supreme discomfort.

One result of the presence of deep disagreements is a strong temptation to form interfaith coalitions around particular political and theological positions. Because of the primacy of polarizing politics in our era, there are many people who will jump at the chance to circle religiously diverse wagons around support for Israel or opposition to it, support for abortion or opposition to it, support for same-sex marriage or opposition to it. The list goes on. This is important organizing work in a diverse democracy, but interfaith leaders should be very careful about widening existing divides. The purpose of interfaith work is to build stronger connections between people who orient around religion differently. As political polarizations linked to faith commitments are among the most salient divisions of our time, interfaith leaders, in my view, ought to be highly concerned with seeking to narrow those divides rather than expand them.

A second challenge posed by deep disagreements is the inclination to focus only on the disagreement, to go right to the elephant in the room. That, in my experience, is not a good idea. When people charge

toward the elephant, they instinctively bring out the spears they have been sharpening for years. They launch their weapons at high velocity, aim for the most sensitive places, and erect impenetrable defenses. It is almost impossible to turn people toward shared values and common ground once the war paint has gone on.

When people ask you why you are avoiding the elephant in the room, tell them it's because there are other animals in the zoo.