

2021

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Recommended Citation

Higgins, Rachel (2021) "Allyship Project: The Importance of Religious Diversity," *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 9 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol9/iss1/8>

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Allyship Project:
The Importance of Religious Diversity

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Allyship Project: The Importance of Religious Diversity History and Oppression of Religions Minorities in the U.S.

The United States is a Christian dominated country with significant privileges for those who follow the Christian faith. However, there are many other religions and people of different faiths in the United States. People of other faiths experience lives of marginalization and oppression because they are not seen as the “norm.” This oppression is rooted historically and systemically in the United States. For this paper, there will be a focus on the background and history of Jews and Muslims in the United States. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are similar in their Abrahamic origin: “One can argue that no one of this three-Judaism, Christianity, Islam – can properly be understood without the others” (Burrell, 2002). All three of these religions can be traced back to the ancient figure of Abraham. While these faiths have many differences, there is room for spiritual companionship between members of these religions.

People of the Islamic and Jewish faith in America have historically been marginalized and oppressed in the United States. It is no secret that America was historically founded by distinctive biblical values. “In God we trust” is on the currency, the national anthem says, “under God,” and there are multiple other examples of the United States valuing Christian principles. It’s also no secret that the United States has always attracted a diverse group of immigrants bringing a plethora of different religions. This means that religious diversity has always been a part of the American narrative: “From the beginning, this country has been an experiment in religious pluralism” (Ammerman, 2006). Whether the experiment was successful or not is an entirely different question. While the United States today is more tolerant of diverse religions, this was not always the case.

Throughout the 17th and 19th centuries, waves of Jewish immigrants came to America to make their home. However, like many immigrants, they were met with challenges to make a life in the United States. “Jews, like other immigrant groups, increasingly needed to prove their loyalty and ‘Americanize’” (Batnitzky, 2011). The Jews that immigrated here had to change to be accepted by the general American public. After World War I, colleges and schools started using quotas to restrict Jewish admission. Even if a Jew was admitted to a school, employers would deny them jobs. This led to an immigration restriction of Jewish people in 1923. Events like these occurred all the way up until World War II. After the horrific events of the Holocaust, antisemitism in the United States began to decline. However, the roots of antisemitism still oppress Jews in America to this day.

Recently the term “new anti-Semitism” was created to focus on the opposition to the creation of a Jewish homeland in the State of Israel. This form of anti-Semitism is used to attack Jews more broadly. Instances of open antisemitism (for example verbal assault), anti-Zionism, and not perceiving anti-Semitism as a relevant issue are all ways anti-Semitism manifests itself in the United States today (Arnold, 2015). Not perceiving anti-Semitism as a current issue has led to instances of mockery since the “issue” doesn’t seem to be a problem for some. Another contributor towards anti-Semitism, new or historic, is ignorance. There is an important distinction between the religious and ethnic part of being Jewish. There are three main sects of Judaism: conservative, orthodox, and reform. “All Judaists— those who practice the religion, Judaism—are Jews, but not all Jews are Judaists” (Neusner, 2003). To be put simply, a Jewish person doesn’t have to practice Judaism, attend synagogue, or read the Torah to be a Jew. The reason this distinction is important is that there is confusion between a religion and an entire ethnic group. “When people confuse an ethnic group with a religious community, then they will

take random, individual opinion as a definitive fact for the beliefs of the faith.” (Neusner, 2003).

The ignorance toward this distinction has created a climate of misunderstanding. Because this ignorance is alive in the United States, we must move toward social change and understanding.

Muslims in America have also experienced challenges of oppression in the United States. The term Islamophobia is described as: “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslim” (Bleich, 2012). This phobia has gripped Western society over the past couple of decades. Islamophobia is a system of both racial and religious intolerance. Muslims are also not the only group targeted by Islamophobia. Sikhs, Hindus, Arab people, and more all suffer the consequences of Islamophobia. Although there was a spike of Islamophobia after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, fear of Islam has deep historical roots in the West and the United States. Islam has been a rival of Christianity ever since its emergence in the early 600s. The feud between these two religions historically has been a fight and back and forth for dominance. Holy wars and crusades in the name of God were used on both sides to establish dominance. This history of fighting and fear still plays a factor in modern relations with Islamic countries. The Christian world sees Islam as an enemy to be defeated, and now, many independent Islam nations are thriving. “Islamic societies gained their independence one by one, became economically self-sufficient and even became a threat to the West at some points (consider the oil embargo of the 1970s and today’s developing Muslim countries), and they started to put effort into regaining their identity which helps to feed the West’s fear” (Sunar, 2017). America has long seen Islamic nations and Muslim people as the “other.” In other terms, seeing Muslim people as different is a way to exclude them from the public sphere. The fear of Islam is deeply rooted in America because of the long historic feud between Christianity and Islam and the idea of an entire group being outsiders.

Although the historical implications of Christianity and Islam are present, the effects of 9/11 brought immense consequences for Muslims in America. 9/11 has become a defining event for the United States. In particular, it created a narrative that saw Islam through a lens of violence, pain, and terror. Although this event sparked hysteria and fear in the hearts of many Americans, the effects on the Muslim American community were detrimental and psychologically scarring. Because of the radical terrorist connection to Islam, an entire community of peaceful people were defined as dangerous: “Islamophobic ideologists and their backers impress the idea that all Muslims are terrorists and that therefore the U.S. should wage war with 1.6 billion Muslims” (Sunar, 2017). This rhetoric was damaging to Muslim Americans because they felt the need to hide from the public, they avoided attending a mosque, and they concealed parts of their identities. Although they hid, Muslims were still met with bias and discrimination. “The unprecedented severity of the backlash and the harsh rhetoric directed against Islam and Muslims made many of the participants feel like social outcasts” (Peek, 2011). Muslims in America felt they had to choose between practicing Islam and being an American. While being Muslim brought unwarranted verbal and physical discrimination, Muslims banded together to change the narrative: “The wave of hostility that was unleashed after the 9/11 attacks may have victimized Muslims, but they did not become passive victims. Instead, they actively struggled to reclaim their faith and to assert their positions in the American social landscape” (Peek, 2011). The fear and frustration with these discriminatory actions led many Muslim Americans to defend their identity and their religion. While their efforts have brought some change and acceptance, Islamophobia is still present.

The histories of Judaism and Islam in America are histories of oppression and marginalization. Even though the United States is more tolerant, there is still a need for social

change. Hate crimes, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism are still alive. Supporting Islam and Judaism centers are needed to create more diverse, tolerant, and accepting religious culture. Feeding into the narrative of Christian dominance will create divisions in the United States: “Religious exclusivism, despite all its talk of one God, divides humanity into the believers and non-believers, with the latter and all their spiritual and religious traditions made unholy. This exclusive and social division sows the seed of violence” (Frawley, 2002). Religious exclusivism divides people because it believes there is one path to salvation and you’re either in or out. A more inclusive posture would recognize religious truths in all religions, while still following a specific faith. Supporting Mosques, Synagogues, and faith centers of any kind is a way to embrace religious inclusiveness. Supporting means seeking out dialogue and learning someone else’s story: “Stories, then, provide us both with the common elements that allow us to make connections with each other and the unique identities that keep us anchored in the midst of our diversity” (Ammerman, 2006). Because of the history of oppressed religious minorities in America, there is still room for social change. Advocating for Jews, Muslims, and followers of all faiths is needed to seek social change and justice.

Current Social Justice Organizations

I connected with both a Mosque and a Synagogue to talk about how they engage in social justice. In the middle of the semester, I visited The Islamic Center of Conjo Valley and spoke with Iman Muhammed Shoyab Mehtar and a volunteer named Aisha Basha. An Iman is the leader of the mosque. He leads prayer, reads from the Quran, and preaches messages to members of the mosque. When asked about social justice, the Iman spoke about the false picture of Islam the media in America creates. “The reality is Muslims are not committing violence and are educating more than any group out there.” Correcting this false narrative is what he sees as his

mission and definition of social justice. When asked about how non-Muslims could support, he said that he would tell people to have more open conversations about different religions. This is how he advocates for change. He expressed it is important to allow yourself to explore other faiths and see what they are all about, without giving up your core beliefs. This is the kind of boldness we need to coexist in different beliefs and religions. This is what religious inclusiveness looks like in practice.

My conversation with the Iman was much longer than my conversation with Aisha, but her perspective was interesting as well. She defined social justice as understanding each other's differences, and that connecting with people that are different is transformative. She helps with volunteer projects at the Islamic Center and spoke to connecting with students coming to volunteer. She described these experiences as ways the Islamic Center advocates for social justice. When asked about what non-Muslims can do, she reiterated the power of connecting. "I believe when we strive to understand each other, we become allies."

The synagogue I connected with was Congregation Schaarai Zedek, located in Tampa, Florida. This congregation practices reform Judaism which is the most progressive out of the 3 sects. I virtually connected with Debbie Orkin Steinfeld and Rabbi Joel Simon. Rabbi Joel Simon described social justice like this: "As Jews, we were once exiles in Egypt, denied entry to America, and victims of the Holocaust. Social justice is remembering our past in order to advocate for our values in the future." The rabbi emphasized the importance of justice in Judaism. Tikkun Olam is a Hebrew concept in Judaism meaning: "to repair the world." The Rabbi said Schaarai Zedek advocates for social justice by being welcoming and inclusive while still practicing Judaism. He also spoke about the congregation's social action committee which seeks to more broadly serve the community. When asked if someone not part of their group

could join, he emphasized that anyone can get involved in this service and it is a way for people to build relationships with each other as well as serving the community.

Debbie is a long-time member of the synagogue and has served on the board and several different committees. When talking about social justice, she expressed some concern over some phrases she hears from the perspective of being a Jewish woman. “The phrase ‘jewed them down,’ is upsetting to me. Many innocent stereotypes of Jews can be taken the wrong way, as anti-Semitism is still a large problem in today’s society.” To Debbie, correcting these incorrect stereotypes is an important step in seeking social justice. In order to seek social justice, Debbie is focused on connecting the community of Judaism. She argued that advocating for reform Judaism bridges the gap of cultural and religious Jews. When asked what a person not from the Jewish faith could do to be an ally, she said that not reinforcing the seemingly harmless Jewish stereotypes is a way to support the Jewish community.

The definition of social justice varied among the people I spoke too. Some focused inwardly, some focused outwardly, but no one argued that social justice has been achieved. Along with this, there was an emphasis in all of the answers on the importance of community and relationship building. Looking through the issues of social justice through a faith lens adds another layer of complexity, as many faiths are called to give back to their community. Jews and Muslims in America educate, give, and serve others despite the oppression and marginalization they face. As a Christian interacting with these different faiths, these interactions have showed that there is a lot of work to be done in order to create social change for members of oppressed faiths, and that a way to effectively start this change is through creating meaningful relationships with people of different faiths.

Cycle of Liberation

Harro's cycle of liberation is a useful tool that offers practical solutions and pathways for social change. It moves people from being contributors of social oppression, to be a part of liberation and justice. The first phases of this cycle are the waking up and getting ready phase. With the goal of creating social change for religious minorities, this phase recognizes the privilege of being a Christian, the oppression of people who aren't Christian, as well as gaining new worldviews based on other people's perspectives.

Next is the reaching out phase. This is an important part of the cycle because it involves seeking experiences outside of the norm. In order to reach out to oppressed minorities, I would start by volunteering alongside them. The Islamic Center of Southern California distributes food to local families in need every Saturday morning. This would be a way for me to serve the community of Los Angeles as well as getting to know Muslims in my community. Another way I can reach out would be through my own campus of Pepperdine. Although Pepperdine is a predominantly Christian campus, there are still students that practice different faiths on the campus. Rabbi Ari Schwarzberg leads a club convocation called Jewish Culture. This convo is open for all students to join. Being a part of this convo would allow me to learn and experience things that aren't familiar as well as connect with people who are different from me.

Building community is the next step in this cycle. Using the opportunities I've listed above, they would allow me to start dialogue with people who are different from me and people who are like me. Bringing some friends to the club convo, or the Islamic Center of California would create more of a community. Becoming a part of the Islamic Center's interfaith partnership would be a way to transition from reaching out to truly building community. The Islamic center's interfaith partnership seeks to understand and initiate dialogue between

Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Addressing our differences, challenging assumptions, and minimizing barriers are all ways to spread from a community of similar people to a community of diversity.

The next step is coalescing and creating change. This is the phase where plans for change are organized and acted upon. After being a part of the interfaith partnership at the Islamic center, I could form a plan to start an Interfaith council at Pepperdine. This would be a way to use my privilege as a Christian to seek out change and allyship across all faiths. Being transformed myself, I could direct my efforts to transform my community at Pepperdine. The last step focuses on maintaining and strengthening change. This would mean opening up doors to everyone for a Pepperdine interfaith council, as well as planning for students coming and leaving. By showing the benefits of an interfaith council on a Christian campus, the council could grow and strengthen even after the people that started it leave the Pepperdine community. This is a practical way for me to practice religious inclusivity as well as seek justice for people of oppressed faiths. The most important thing to remember throughout this cycle is to listen. By taking the time to intently listen to someone who is different and less privileged, connection across all cultures, identities, and religions is possible.

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