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Interfaith Communities: Relationships in Thirdspace

By

Jessica Spence Moss

Claremont Graduate University

2023

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Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Jessica Spence Moss as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies.

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Abstract

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Claremont Graduate University: 2023

Contending with, and expanding the understanding of, diverse interfaith relationships, this project presents a nuanced awareness of interfaith action and the dialectic of lived religion with interfaith engagement. Arguing that interfaith is a type of thirdspace in which engagements have affective impacts on individuals within interfaith communities, as well as orientation towards religious communities. While there are common struggles, interpretations, and socializations that hinder the participation of women and non-binary individuals in institutional interfaith spaces, observing organic interfaith relationships as occurring in thirdspace allows for the recognition of radical inclusion and dedication to diversity.

Dedicated to Aunt Lanna, an influential woman

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Eve Oishi, Dr. David Seitz, Dr. JoAnna Poblete, and Dr. Gail Stearns for their support, guidance, critiques, and encouragement. I want to thank the 58 contributors who made this project possible, each spending anywhere from 1-4 hours with me as I recorded their histories. Many are friends but to maintain confidentiality I will not name them, but you know who you are. I need to share my gratitude for the Cultural Studies and Blaisdell Fellowships, the Albert B Friedman Award that allowed me to offer a small stipend to all contributors, the American Academy of University Women American Fellowship that allowed me to focus on this dissertation for the last year, and the CGU Transdisciplinary Studies Dissertation Fellowship. I am grateful for my CSU Fullerton, Chaffey, and Mt. San Antonio College Sociology department colleagues for their support and encouragement. I could not have completed this project without my interfaith community, many of who contributed to this project, as well as my friends, especially Leslie Fehr and Dr. Arline Votruba that listened to me talk incessantly about this project. Most importantly I need to thank my husband, Alan Moss, my children Owen and Curren, and my mom, Charla Spence, for putting up with me the last four years. Finally, I need to apologize for the length of the dissertation, condensing 2,147 pages of transcripts (which by the way is longer than the Bible and Quran combined, and almost as long as the Talmud) was a difficult task to say the least.

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Introduction

In the simplest of terms interfaith is the interaction and engagement between people of various religious and worldview backgrounds. After 10 years of participating in interfaith spaces in Southern California, I came to this project with the question of: What are the motivations, experiences, critiques, and contributions of women and non-binary folks in interfaith spaces? In this dissertation I used post-colonial geography and psychoanalytics to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of interfaith that is grounded in space and affectually experienced.

This project examines three interfaith spaces, categorized as institutional, intentional, and organic. Institutional interfaith spaces are those in which encounters with religious others are formally organized. Interfaith studies typically focus on institutional spaces that have general goals of education, understanding, and cooperation amongst religious diversity. Though these interfaith communities are being formed in a religiously diverse nation, they are still heavily influenced by Christianity and are critiqued by the contributors of this project for their hierarchical structures that privilege comfort and unity over inclusion. These critiques are offered by reliable critics, that are commenting “from the inside,” not condemning “from the outside.”¹ Many of these critiques come from the margins, as non-male, non-straight, and non-white identities experience marginalization in religious spaces that is often replicated, in some form, in many interfaith spaces. Ultimately, any marginalization hinders the goals of understanding, cooperation, and radical inclusion that are professed by interfaith projects. Intentional interfaith efforts can easily be lumped in with institutional efforts, however these spaces are typically

¹ Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*.

organized by a single faith community or are civic efforts to address a specific social issue.

Finally, organic interfaith spaces are formed when religious diversity is encountered in everyday spaces and individuals become curious about the religious other they encounter therein.

My analysis of these spaces that are brought to light through these 58 oral histories lead me to offer three major contributions. First, interfaith spaces are a type of thirdspace, an in-between space, that is neither religious nor secular, but allows for radical inclusion of religious and non-religious identities in the work of social change and social justice. Second, women and non-binary folks enter interfaith spaces as the result of an interfaith ethic which is characterized by curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality. And third, interfaith can be a reparative tool, a transitional space, in which contributor's relationships to religion and religious spaces are repaired.

As women and non-binary folks struggle against patriarchal structures in their traditions and society in general, interfaith spaces provide opportunity to lead, to engage with others, and to be agents of social change. However, interfaith spaces are far from utopic. The significance of this project is that it attempts to remove any pretense of comfort or unity that inhibit inclusion and justice in interfaith spaces by putting the experiences of women and non-binary folks front and center. By highlighting the challenges and critiques that these 58 contributors have of interfaith spaces, more honest conversations can be had to help interfaith fulfill its objectives of education, understanding, and collaboration.

The use oral history was selected because of its ability to do the cultural work required to bring together the experiences and practices of 58 contributors from at least 15 different religious traditions along with the unique religious and political implications of their relationships to one another. The oral history method is helpful in deciphering individual definitions of interfaith, the

spaces in which interfaith takes place, the relationships formed in these spaces, the impact of these relationships and experiences on lived religion, as well as the limitations and benefits of interfaith. Their experiences are dependent on their own religious identity and the space in which interfaith encounters take place, making physical and metaphysical space important components of interfaith encounters. This leads to an understanding of interfaith space as a type of thirdspace, an in-between space, that is neither a religious nor secular space but allows for radical inclusion of religious and non-religious identities in the work of social justice.

Over the next few pages, I will introduce a few of the contributors in order to highlight the relationships that are formed in interfaith spaces.² I had met 48 of the contributors prior to the start of this project and consider over half of them friends or close acquaintances. 42 of the contributors participate in interfaith spaces in significant ways; 25 have been or are currently serving as founding members, presidents, or other board positions on community interfaith councils; and 16 contributors are ordained or religiously educated in some way and hold positions as religious leaders in their communities or are chaplains. Contributors range in age from 20-78, they represent at least 15 religious traditions and worldviews and at least 18 ethnicities.

The relationships presented in this project exist on multiple planes, cross multiple paths, and intersect on issues other than religion. Relationships are not linearly formed; therefore, I introduce the contributors not in the order in which they were interviewed but based on the relationships they have with other contributors. As I include their self-identified faith tradition, religious affiliation, or worldview perspective in parentheses, the religious diversity of interfaith

² Many contributors requested pseudonyms to be used, for consistency I have decided to use pseudonyms for all contributors.

relationships is identified. I met Sophia (“Sikh American of Punjabi descent”), Dorothy (who describes herself as “a practicing Catholic, whatever that means”), and Ida (Presbyterian) when I began participating in interfaith communities in 2012. Prior to meeting Aisha (Muslim) at a Thanksgiving interfaith service in 2012 I had met her mom, Zaha (Muslim), along with Mildred (New Thought), Miriam (Jewish), Hafsa (Muslim), and Gloria (non-religious). This was the core group of women that introduced me to interfaith work in Southern California.

The below table highlights the relationships between the 58 participants to this project. This is not an exhaustive list of the relationships between participants but based on relationships mentioned during the collection of the oral history, as well as conversations had before and after. Recognizing that some contributors might associate with or know of other contributors that are not listed, relationships rang from intimate and primary friendships to acquaintances or simply being aware of another contributor. I explicitly attach my name to Francis because they were not connected to another contributor, but I met her in Toronto, Canada at The Parliament of the World’s Religions in 2018. I met Naima and Judith at the 2018 Parliament as well, and then reconnected with them in Chicago, Illinois at an Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) leadership conference in 2019. Mary entered interfaith spaces after serving as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Southern California. I met her as a missionary and in the spring of 2017, she asked for my advice as she began to engage in interfaith spaces. Mary stayed with me in the summer of 2018 and was able to meet with other some of the other women that eventually contributed to this project. As a family member, Sally has also come to know other contributors to this project through me.

	Religious Affiliation	Relationships
Abigail	None “wizzle”	Sophia, Mariah, Ida, Sahib, Olivia, Emma, Elizabeth, Nellie
Aisha	Muslim	Sophia, Dorothy, Catherine, Zaha, Fatima, Mildred, Leila, Hafsa, Zhang
Amy	Episcopalian	Sophia, Harriet, Madeline, Helen
Amyra	Zoroastrian	Sophia, Sahib
Asma	Muslim	Shaheen, Kunti, Savitri, Rachel, Yael, Kala, Emily
Betty	Protestant	Sophia, Yuna, Shaheen, Emily, Asma, Savitri
Carole	None	Abigail
Catherine	Protestant	Dorothy, Amy, Zaha, Madeline, Helen, Zainab, Margaret, Gloria
Deborah	Jewish	Sophia, Dorothy, Eliza, Zaha, Leslie, Martha
Donna	Jewish	Sophia, Harriet, Elizabeth
Dorothy	Catholic	Sophia, Aisha, Catherine, Zaha, Mildred, Miriam, Leslie, Betty, Shaheen, Rosalie, Johnny, Leila, Deborah, Margaret, Esther, Gloria
Elif	“Sushi” Muslim	Miriam, Teresa, Patricia
Eliza	Mormon	Aisha, Zaha, Abigail, Mildred, Deborah, Hafsa, Elizabeth, Martha, Zhang
Elizabeth	Mormon	Sophia, Ida, Eliza, Sahib, Mariah, Harriet, Abigail, Teresa
Elsie	Protestant	Helen, Jane
Emily	Mormon	Shaheen, Betty, Savitri, Asma
Emma	Humanist	Olivia
Esther	None	Dorothy, Mildred
Fatima	Muslim	Aisha, Zaha
Francis	New Thought	Jessica
Gloria	Non-Religious	Dorothy, Catherine, Zainab, Miriam, Mildred, Margaret
Hafsa	Muslim	Aisha, Eliza, Zaha, Mildred, Martha
Harriet	Protestant	Sophia, Yuna, Amy, Donna
Helen	“Heinz 57” Christian	Amy, Madeline, Elsie, Miriam, Jane

Ida	Presbyterian	Sophia, Mariah, Eliza, Sahib, Zaha, Abigail, Joan, Teresa, Olivia, Elizabeth, Zhang, Carole, Nellie
Jane	Mormon	Helen, Elsie
Joan	Contemplative Catholic	Ida, Abigail, Olivia
Johnny	None	Sophia, Aisha, Dorothy, Leslie
Judith	Protestant	Naima, Jessica
Kala	Native	Asma, Shaheen, Nellie
Kunti	Hindu	Asma
Leila	Muslim	Aisha, Dorothy, Zaha
Leslie	None	Sophia, Dorothy, Johnny, Aisha, Rosalie
Linda	Muslim	Dorothy, Zaha, Sophia, Zainab, Catherine
Madeline	Episcopalian	Amy, Helen
Margaret	Unitarian Universalist	Dorothy, Sophia, Catherine, Zainab, Gloria
Mariah	Muslim	Ida, Sophia, Dorothy, Sahib, Zaha, Abigail, Olivia, Elizabeth
Martha	Mormon	Eliza, Zaha, Mildred, Deborah, Hafsa,
Mary	Mormon	Jessica, Sally, Sophia, Dorothy
Mildred	New Thought	Aisha, Dorothy, Zaha, Miriam, Hafsa, Gloria, Eliza, Zhang, Nellie
Miriam	Jewish	Dorothy, Mildred, Elif, Nellie, Gloria, Patricia, Rosalie
Naima	Protestant	Judith, Jessica
Nellie	Native	Sophia, Abigail, Ida, Mildred, Miriam, Olivia, Kala
Olivia	Protestant	Ida, Joan, Abigail, Emma, Elizabeth, Nellie
Patricia	Protestant	Miriam, Elif
Rachel	Jewish	Asma, Catherine, Rosalie, Shaheen, Yuna, Betty
Rosalie	Jewish	Jessica, Miriam, Mildred, Nellie
Sahib	Sikh	Sophia, Mariah, Ida, Amyra, Teresa, Elizabeth
Sally	Mormon	Jessica, Mary
Savitri	Hindu	Shaheen, Miriam, Mildred, Sophia, Zainab, Asma, Dorothy, Betty, Yuna, Emily, Rosalie
Shaheen	Muslim	Sophia, Dorothy, Sara, Savitri, Betty

Sophia	Sikh	Aisha, Dorothy, Harriet, Amy, Sahib, Zaha, Amyra, Leslie, Betty, Johnny, Teresa, Deborah, Margaret, Esther, Donna, Elizabeth, Savitri, Nellie, Shaheen
Teresa	Buddhist	Sophia, Ida, Sahib, Elif, Elizabeth
Yael	Jewish	Asma, Shaneen, Rosalie, Savitri
Yuna	Muslim	Sophia, Betty
Zaha	Muslim	Sophia, Aisha, Dorothy, Jynene, Sahib, Fatima, Mildred, Leila, Hafsa, Gloria, Martha, Zhang, Linda
Zainab	Muslim	Catherine, Margaret, Gloria
Zhang	Bahai	Zaha

My first argument is that relationships are formed in spaces of encounter. Orange County, California, USA is the geographical location in which many of these relationships established. As one of the most religiously diverse locations in the world, at one time Orange County was home to at least 13 community interfaith councils and were part of the Orange County Interfaith Network that was formed in the mid 2000's. 19 of the contributors have been involved in one or more of these interfaith councils and contributors engage in interfaith communities in Los Angeles. There are two groups of contributors that are associated with private universities that house interfaith centers. Naima (Protestant) was a student and the president of the interfaith council at a private Los Angeles university where Judith (Protestant) is the interfaith Chaplain. While Ida (Presbyterian), Abigail ('whizzle'), Mariah (Muslim), Joan (Contemplative Catholic), Olivia (Protestant), Elizabeth (Mormon), and Carole (none) have all worked at, volunteered for, or attended interfaith events at the interfaith center of a private Orange County university, Leslie (none) however, who also works at this university, did not speak of interfaith relationships at the university. All of the interfaith encounters that Leslie mentioned take place outside of this institutional space.

The relationships that Leslie (none) focuses on are more intimate. Their mother, Dorothy (Catholic) and their partner, Johnny (none), make up their core relationships. However, other relationships that use intimate familial language are acknowledged. Sophia (Sikh) considers Sahib (Sikh) an aunty. Catherine (Protestant), Zainab (Muslim), Margaret (Unitarian Universalist), and Gloria (non-religious) call themselves ‘the soul sisters’ and have matching bracelets to honor their relationship. While not all contributors have declared familial bonds in such a observed way, it is not uncommon to hear contributors refer to each other as ‘sister.’

As this project focuses on women and non-binary folks, it is not focusing on interfaith spaces as gendered, though some are. In total, 10 of the contributors participate in women only interfaith spaces. In the wake of 9/11 Miriam (Jewish) founded a women-only interfaith organization³ and more recently in 2016 Helen (Christian) began another women-only interfaith council. While only a few contributors participate in these women-only interfaith spaces, those that do find that limiting the group to women allows the focus to be on issues that impact women, while offering the latitude to address issues of concern. Acknowledging the challenge in gendering an interfaith space, Jane explains that there are “commonalities that women can relate to” and wonders “what that's gonna look like,” as the group grows to include transgender women and others. Aware of this blindspot I extended an invitation to two non-binary friends to participate in this project. Struggling to overcome exclusivist language, Leslie suggested the simple limitation of “not men.” However, to clarify, this project simply focuses on those voices that are not cisgender men.

³ [Women's Interfaith Initiatives in the United States Post 9/11 \(2006\) | Pluralism Project Archive \(harvard.edu\)](#)

Method and Theory

Conducting research from 2019 to 2022, in the midst of the latest occurrence of political and racial unrest in the United States, heightened awareness of conflicts in Israel, Palestine, and the middle east in general, along with a global pandemic provides unique context to the connections and challenges that speak to this specific point in time. Contributors to this project share their experiences in interfaith spaces, provide their own critical analysis of those spaces, and highlight their benefits, through the use of oral history method. Utilizing both post-colonial geography and psychoanalytic theories to analyze these histories, I argue that individuals are affected by interfaith spaces, and relationships formed therein are impacted. At the same time, spaces are transformed by these relationships, and become spaces of interfaith engagement.

I use post-colonial geography and psychoanalytics as useful ways to understand, interfaith spaces as well as the experiences therein. Utilizing object relations and affect theories to articulate the motivations, experiences, and contribution of interfaith participants allows me to analyze the relationships that individuals have with their own religious traditions, with interfaith as a space, and with the religious others that they encounter in these spaces. That is, to look for the inner workings of interfaith as an institutional endeavor as well as an externalization of personal experiences within both institutional and organic interfaith settings.

This project's objective is to construct a roadmap for interfaith application and action. In compiling these histories common struggles, interpretations, and socializations that impact activity in religious and interfaith spaces surface. The result is an acknowledgement of the steadfast dedication of contributors to their religious and world-view perspectives, as defined by them, along with a commitment to interfaith, also defined by them. The argument that has

emerged is that interfaith serves both personal and social purposes. On a personal level, interfaith provides opportunities to deepen faith, understand others, live compassionately, gain confidence, and repair ‘bad’ objects – namely the objects of religion and religious communities. I also call attention to the danger in participating in interfaith in order to escape the pain and discomfort of one’s own religious tradition.³ On the societal level, interfaith is a tool for peacebuilding, for conflict prevention, and social healing. However, much like Miranda Joseph’s work in *Against the Romance of Community*⁴, this project also guards against a romance of interfaith. By analyzing the motivations, experiences, contributions, and critiques of participants that are, at times, marginalized in interfaith spaces, we can see interfaith for what it is as well as what it has the potential to do.

Oral History

Oral histories are a perception of a narrative at a single point in time. The next day, week or year will introduce new experiences that will cause one to reflect, narrate, and offer new perspectives. The history won’t change, though the meanings and interpretations might shift or expand. Oral history allows each interview to take on a life of its own, allowing both participants to be co-creators in the knowledge produced and the experience had. Thus, the power of oral history is in the meaning making that not only occurs for the narrator who shares the story but also for the interviewer and reader who are influenced by these stories. My hope, like Hyun Kyung Chung, is that this project “will generate some stirring of the heart, sharing, discussion, fighting, laughter, and celebration among people who are traveling on their own

⁴ Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*.

journey's home.”⁵ Home to community, home to family, home to religion, or to a home all their own.

The beauty of Oral History is that it is an insightful experience, as Donna shared:

When I looked at your questions, I was like “oh my god I hope I have enough to say” so I thank you for really drawing things out of me that I hadn't even thought would come up. It has been very introspective for me. It helped me connect some Helens... I appreciate your letting us go into some tangents because at the end of the day, I think it all comes back to some core principles, the importance of value-based discourse whether you're talking about a political conflict or religious issues.

Each conversation takes on a life of its own. In multiple discussions I was able to reflect on my own experiences and at times the contributors asked me poignant questions as well.

Towards the end of the interview with Mariah asked me: “What is your goal with interfaith?”

Throughout this project I hope you will indulge me as I contemplate my answer.

One of my first goals is influenced by a feminist understanding of power. Accepting that conflict is always possible, this project centers on “the promise of building bridges across cultures, identities, and politics” as a “driving force”⁶ for feminists, oral historians, and interfaith activists. Oral histories are particularly useful in observing interfaith spaces and participation because the objectives are quite similar. Both are built around people. Both encourage an egalitarian mode of engaging with others. Both bring histories, interpretations, and experiences into, and out of, community. Both help marginalized and minority communities toward dignity, self-confidence, validation, and protection. Both build bridges across time and space. The use of oral histories allows us to recognize all parts of identity. Similarly, interfaith acknowledges religious and spiritual identity as integral to self-hood, alongside race, ethnicity, gender, and

⁵ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*.

⁶ Rojas, *Women of Color and Feminism*, 29.

sexual orientation. By telling and reading these stories we humanize the other and protect ourselves against dehumanization.

Through affectual writing “resonance between researching, researched, and reading bodies”⁷ allow all of us to critically examine the ways in which individuals come to, and experience, interfaith spaces. Following the work of Maythee Rojas, this project seeks to find those stories that need to be heard, in order for us to find resonance. Resonance being “the power to evoke enduring images, memories, and emotions.”⁸ Thus this project presents reflections from contributors (first name pseudonyms) alongside academics (last names) to give life and practicality to academic products. The hope is that each person who comes in contact with this project will be able to internalize the experiences, find connection to them, and bring them back to their own faith, interfaith, and civic communities, adding layers of meaning that are determined by this new space. Each individual’s history could be siloed as disparate parts of identity in quantitative research – gender, religion, race, country of origin, age, etc. – but here, contributors find connection⁹ through nuance. Because “storytelling has been women’s way of inheriting truth” and “their bodies remember what it is like to be a no-body and what it is like to be a some-body,”¹⁰ oral history is an obvious and natural method for understanding women and non-binary experiences in interfaith spaces. Jane (Mormon) shares that she receives “energy” from hearing the stories of religious others. The hope is that for those who contribute and come in connect with this project it will be another beneficial interfaith experience that breathes energy into those that encounter it.

⁷ Militz, Faria, and Schurr, “Affectual Intensities: Writing with Resonance as Feminist Methodology,” 2.

⁸ Militz, Faria, and Schurr, 2.

⁹ Stephen M. Sloan, “Swimming in the Exaflood: Oral History as Information in the Digital Age,” in *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, ed. Douglas A Boyd and Mary A Larson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 184.

¹⁰ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*, 104.

By employing “a process of critical writing, reflection, and rewriting” as presented by Militz, Faria, and Schurr, I am able to better recognize “moments of resonance between different bodies and objects.”¹¹ By analyzing the stories told about encounters between participants themselves, as well as the spaces they occupy, we begin to see that affects are infused with power.¹² This acknowledgement complicates the assumed dichotomy that interfaith experts are either “leaders of religious institutions who initiate, participate in, and offer rationale for interfaith encounters from within their own traditions” or “scholars who attempt – from within, on the edges, or outside these dialogues – to describe and systematize such encounters and their complex motivations, logics and tensions in the context of broader social and intellectual issues.”¹³ This project centers interfaith participants, not all of whom are ordained religious leaders or religious academics, but are experts of interfaith experience.

Because of my positionality as a practicing Mormon, which was either previously known by the contributors or made known during the interviews, most contributors made comments that centered on their own connection to the Mormon tradition. I don’t know for sure if these comments were influenced by my connection to the tradition, but I assume it was a persuasive condition. For example, both Leslie and Johnny made comments that I am the first Mormon friend they have had. They appreciated the positive impression that I have given them of The Church because their previous assumption of the Mormon tradition was discriminatory and conservative. Which seems to be a common perception.

¹¹ Militz, Faria, and Schurr, “Affectual Intensities: Writing with Resonance as Feminist Methodology,” 1.

¹² Militz, Faria, and Schurr, 1.

¹³ Kate McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 14.

These histories are also supplemented by personal experiences, or what Clifford Geertz calls “experience-near.” As a participant in these interfaith communities,¹⁴ I emphasize the relationships that I have that make this project possible.¹⁵ At the same time, I do not assume that the work I do will automatically be empowering for my co-collaborators. Since many are close friends and many have far more interfaith experience and I doubt my position as an academic will have much impact. However, as a white, cis-gender, heterosexual, Christian woman, I understand that my body has access to, and experiences, interfaith spaces differently than non-Christian contributors and those with various gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and immigrant identities. What causes me the greatest stress is the potential that my relationship, as well as the relationships that they have with each other and their faith traditions, might result in a performance of interfaith experience that is not complete. Milit, Faria, and Schurr remind us that our “own affectual reactions” impact “knowledge production” and at times limit our ability to be reflexive.¹⁶ Nevertheless I hope that collaborators will find a deeper connection to one another as well as a greater understanding of the challenges of interfaith work. For the reader, my hope is that this project complicates the ideal of interfaith, while also expanding our understanding of its benefits. These benefits are limited by the anxieties that what is said and recorded might offend other participants, therefore contributors may hold back criticisms or skim over sensitive topics to protect against political, religious, or social consequences. Aware of this challenge, I do my best to present the contributions in authentic, critical, and generous ways.

An example: When I asked for suggestion of other interfaith participants I should meet with, Catherine was reluctant in suggesting Amy (Episcopalian). Cautiously, Catherine said:

¹⁴ Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 57.

¹⁵ Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 424.

¹⁶ Militz, Faria, and Schurr, “Affectual Intensities: Writing with Resonance as Feminist Methodology,” 2.

“she’s gay.” I was confused by her apprehension. I assured Catherine that Amy’s voice was needed and that I was excited to speak with her. After leaving, I contemplated as to why Catherine would show hesitation but then realized that my connection with Mormonism, and The Church’s visible and at times aggressive objection to LGBTQ issues created a concern for Catherine about my comfort and ability to speak with Amy. After completing many more interviews, I was able to more clearly see how the public opinions of religious institutions and their representatives influence how those who affiliate with those religions are perceived by members of interfaith communities.

When I met with Amy a few months later, we had a wonderful conversation and I am grateful for her willingness to share her experiences with me, offering a compelling critique of the limitations of interfaith. The affective experience of Amy is an indictment against the comfort that many have with current interfaith efforts, but she is not alone in voicing these concerns. There is a solid rebuke against those interfaith efforts that privilege performative unity over the possible discomfort that will inevitably be felt if individuals are willing to deconstruct their own biases in an effort for social justice.

Women and non-binary contributors

I really feel a female presence is so necessary. – Teresa

Society, in general, and religion specifically, is built on a system of marginalization, perpetuated by, among other things, the practices of patriarchy and sexism.¹⁷ According to Rita Gross, these structures are “deeply problematic for all religions,”¹⁸ and by extension, I argue, deeply problematic for interfaith as well. When Amma said that “there are only two castes: men

¹⁷ Rayaprol, “Feminist Research: Redefining Methodology in the Social Sciences,” 369.

¹⁸ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What’s the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 283.

and women. Muslims, Christians, Hindus – they’re all the same”¹⁹ she was not universalizing religion, but acknowledging the gendered power dynamics that exists in all traditions.

Acknowledging that men, women, and non-binary individuals experience religious and interfaith spaces differently, it stands to reason that their motivations are different as well. However, this is not a move to essentialize womanhood, as Judith Gruber warns.²⁰ In fact, as Laura Levitt argues, there is a problematic “identitarian unity” when women form bonds based on their difference from men and their shared, though different, experienced of discrimination.²¹ To be clear the focus on women and non-binary folks is not an assertion that they are more important than men, but that they bring something different to interfaith tables. Creating a project that lifts voices that are often ignored or shushed²² in interfaith spaces is my primary objective, because “invisibility is not a natural state for anyone”²³ and because as Amy admonished: “All our voices count. Not just men’s voices. Not just the loudest. Not just the theologically most conservative.”

Perceiving the dominance of male leadership in many interfaith spaces, Deborah (Jewish) suggests that this is the result of the authority given to men from religious institutions. For those male religious leaders that enter interfaith spaces, Rosalie (Jewish) observes their purpose as being one of formal networking with other religious leaders. This focus limits dialogue to the political and social positions that they are expected to maintain. Thus, Betty (Protestant) determines that male leaders search for “comradery” which requires less vulnerability. Whereas Linda (Muslim) points out that women seem to have a more “empathetic nature”. Regardless of the historical or social²⁴ context that has led to these differences, Margaret (Unitarian

¹⁹ Fluekiger, *Amma’s Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India*, 8.

²⁰ Gruber, “Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak?” 53.

²¹ Levitt, “Chapter 4,” 95.

²² Miriam

²³ Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 35.

²⁴ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, 11.

Universalist) points out that those who are engaged in interfaith spaces “tend to be women” and the men that are engaged “are different.” Linda (Muslim) clarifies that this does not “imply that men don't have that capacity” to be empathetic, but that because women do not hold religious authority, they seem to have “greater latitude”²⁵ in interfaith spaces to discuss matters of the heart and take on challenging topics. Even if women are not burdened by the limitations of being religious leaders, they often struggle, like those that Andrea Smith observed, “to be heard and valued by the very communities and organizations that [they] serve.”²⁶ With that being said, Amyra perceives women being more “willing to give up their time,” to let go of ego, listen, and ask questions.

Though women have been excluded from history, and “societies have diminished the[ir] importance,” “restricted the[ir] influence,”²⁷ undervalued their practices and contributions, and have been theologically determined as “differently human or less fully human than men”²⁸ the women who do get remembered do so for their departure from “established traditions.”²⁹ Even when secularization claims to create equity, when religion is feminized and then delegitimized, women are once again devalued. I will not go so far as to say interfaith participation is an act of “religious dissent”³⁰ on the part of women and non-binary folks, or emancipation from social constructs, but as many attest, being “excluded from religious leadership” encourages ambivalence and creativity. Mary Bednarowski argues that “because women have not been the custodians of theological boundaries within their institutions, they worry much less that

²⁵ Deborah

²⁶ Smith, *Unreconciled: From Racial Reconciliation to Racial Justice in Christian Evangelicalism*, 250.

²⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 247.

²⁸ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 4.

²⁹ Bednarowski, 12.

³⁰ Braude, *Sisters and Saints: Women and American Religion (Religion in American Life)*, 89.

theological experimentation and creatively will topple their traditions.”³¹ Though they exercise agency in these spaces, women and non-binary folks are not free from the double bind of patriarchy in their religious traditions and the patriarchy of secular society. Whether this patriarchal structure is one that is inherent to religion or not, many contributors share their observations and experiences of pervasive patriarchal “bullshit”³² in both religious and interfaith spaces. However, it is also important to acknowledge that because women have been socialized in patriarchal spaces as Ida (Presbyterian) contends, they “aren’t necessarily going to do it differently... because they’re walking into a structure.” In other words, because women have been socialized in the same patriarchal religions, they won’t necessarily interact in interfaith spaces differently than men.

Women in general, and non-binary folks in particular, have real and perceived challenges within faith traditions. As Marie Griffith notes, “religion... in its more traditional forms, is viewed as a tool for preserving patriarchy, suppressing women’s energies and talents, and imbuing them with ‘false consciousness’,”³³ however as Griffith argues, and this project supports, this narrative does not tell the whole story “of women in American religion.”³⁴ Regardless of the religion one is coming from, contributors report experiencing more latitude in interfaith spaces as they claim positions of leadership and credibility. Many contributors point out that this is not just a religious issue. “Women are oppressed in all societies and faiths and cultures and countries. It is not a matter of faith or a matter of race, it’s just a matter of society.”³⁵ Having observed, experienced, and been frustrated by, the patriarchy that is

³¹ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 187.

³² Sangeetha

³³ Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, 204.

³⁴ Griffith, 204.

³⁵ Leila

“seeping”³⁶ into institutional interfaith spaces, these contributors have also observed the beautiful examples of women and non-binary folks who are “unapologetic about taking up space.”

Contributors acknowledge, similarly to the work of Bednarowski, that in spite of women and non-binary folks being excluded “from positions of public authority, their traditions have shaped and sustained them, given them communities and religious histories, and offered them language, symbols, teachings, and rituals by which to articulate their own religious ideas.”³⁷ And in many cases, it could be argued that because women are not restricted by the institutional roles of their male counterparts, women have little to lose when engaging in public spaces, like interfaith.

Conceding that women are not perfect, Leila (Muslim) still believes that “women want to grow things, we want to make things better, we want to heal things” because from “the moment we're born we're judged and treated differently.” Margaret (UU) and Sally (Mormon) both share this sentiment, reflecting on times when they have felt that they were treated differently or ignored. Using those experiences to become more aware and empathetic to those around them. Recognizing that there are some spaces in which women are affirmed, does not negate the challenges experienced and hurt felt when they are rejected. While structures of oppression are observed by some, they are affectively felt by others who have been laughed at for wanting to be religious leaders, have been told “there is no place in ministry for women,”³⁸ been told that their “lifestyle” is a sin, and have experienced “almost strategic efforts”³⁹ to silence their voices.

Therefore, those women that “feel” empowered in interfaith spaces but still lack confirmed authority from their tradition, often claim authority in some other way – through

³⁶ Yuna

³⁷ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 18.

³⁸ April

³⁹ Interfaith panel of Women religious leaders, March 2022

education, politics, or community leadership. Therefore, women are taking on leadership roles in interfaith spaces, and have the potential to impact their religious spaces as well. However, they are still affected by the cultural perceptions of women within the religious community, as well as the perceptions that others in interfaith spaces have of various religious communities. Thus, women and non-binary folks struggle, at times, to find a ‘place’ in interfaith as well as in their faith tradition and society at large. For example, in agreement with Asma and Zaha, Fatima shares that Muslim women are often “given more credence and more respect as religious authority in interfaith spaces than within the Muslim community.” Asma observes that “women tend to populate and organize interfaith events, way more than men” because, she contends: “Muslim women don't have anything to lose. Which is why you see Muslim women being so brave in public spaces.” And yet when interfaith events are being planned, women are rarely consulted.

Of course, religious structures impact interfaith but, Rosalie believes there is potential for the reverse influence to occur. While interfaith is still plagued by patriarchy and stereotypes, it is also a space in which structures of inequity can be overcome. This is because, as Hokulani Aikau argues “religion is more than an institution with the power to transmit and transform society and identities; the devotees themselves also have the power to transform religion.”⁴⁰ There are opportunities for women and non-binary individuals to find support and respect in interfaith spaces and experience more equity between religious leaders and laypeople than in their faith communities.

⁴⁰ Aikau, *A Chosen People, A Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai'i*, 1.

Despite the fact that “women constitute the majority of participants in religious activities and institutions”⁴¹ the androcentric nature of some interfaith spaces, as Gruber notes, “conceals the contributions of women and erases their experiences as legitimate sources for interfaith conversations.”⁴² Asma has taken classes on Islamic law, theology, and chaplaincy; in many respects she is more academically and theologically educated “than a lot of the men that give Friday sermons,” but by virtue of her being a woman, she is not “given credibility.” Similarly, Elif (Muslim) received a master’s degree in interfaith leadership but is not a “credentialed religious leader” in her Muslim community. Consistent with this, Asma contends that “a lot of Muslim women end up in interfaith spaces because we’re not welcome in Muslim spaces.” And yet, because interfaith spaces are often inspired by religious structures, it is difficult for many of the contributors to this project to transverse the hierarchy of interfaith spaces. Often positions of authority and credibility are denied women in larger cultural contexts. Many contributors point to the strange paradox that organizers of interfaith programs often look for symbols of religious authority such as robes or other religious attire often worn by men, while most of the daily tasks and practical work that maintains and perpetuates religious communities, including interfaith relationships, are taken up by women. Having been called on occasion with a request to find an Imam to speak at an interfaith event, often Asma acknowledges that the individual with the most religious literacy on a given topic is a woman. And yet, because women don’t come with a “priestly costume” that confirms their institutional authority, the petitioner will continue to insist on finding an Imam. The closest thing for Muslim women is a head scarf, commonly known as hijab, which Asma and other women in this project do not wear. These experiences that Asma and other Muslim women have highlight Vivian May’s argument that knowledge is only as valid

⁴¹ Braude, *Sisters and Saints: Women and American Religion (Religion in American Life)*, 87.

⁴² Gruber, “Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak?,” 52.

as the “authoritative knower” is accepted.⁴³ Making it necessary to point out to interfaith organizers and participants that expertise can be found outside traditional perceptions of religious authority.

Examining the motivations, experiences, contributions, and critiques of women and non-binary folks in interfaith spaces requires a recognition that, depending on the religious tradition one is coming from and the religious traditions of those being engaged, perceptions affect the relationships that will be formed. In other words, the perceptions of what women can do in religious and interfaith spaces is affected by one’s own interpretation of religion as well as the perception of religion made by others. For example, as previously noted, Mormonism is seen as being conservative, discriminatory, and patriarchal, and in many spaces, Islam is similarly viewed. As an ordained minister and academic Ida reflects on her perceptions of the religious traditions of her Mormon and Muslim colleagues:

Our Muslim chaplain and I disagree on the role of women in religion... his wife is a firecracker, but she would never be able to hold the position he holds. My Mormon colleague, his wife can't hold the position. He has a priestly role, but his wife can't. So, I know we deeply disagree on a lot of those things.

Muslim and Mormon contributors are not oblivious to these suppositions, Emily offers a counterclaim that “LDS women have a place... women do have outlets for leadership.” To which Martha adds: “I have been trained from a very early age to take leadership roles.” This is not the same as a “priestly role”, but it does mean that many Mormon women do not feel as subordinate as some perceive them to be. Circumventing Ida’s critique, Eliza insists that she feels “just as empowered from God as anybody that would actually be ordained to the priesthood.” She continues: “I have all the same power and all the same understanding; I have all the same

⁴³ May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 35.

blessings. And all the same admonitions to go out and bless lives and minister and do those things.” However, just because someone feels like they have power, authority, and expertise, the challenge remains of having that authority affirmed. Feeling the same and having the same authority from your religious traditions is different. Having a ‘just take it’ mentality is not the same as being equal. As Ann Braude cautions, “we must not confuse the ability to endure with the opportunity to influence.”⁴⁴ Therefore, at the end of the day, Mormon women are not ordained, and they do not have authority to act on behalf of The Church as Ida does in her tradition.

Contesting assumptions of Islam, Elif insists that “there is a space for women in Islam to have a voice and to lead and to inspire and influence” but asks if women are prepared to enter that space. Zaha who is, among other things, a prison Chaplain, is already in these spaces. She challenges the stereotypes about what women can do. Zaha claims her position and does so for all religious women:

We are leaders, we have education, and we can be leaders. We're not different than men in the eyes of God. We're the same. We have a role; we have a mission in this life. We can do it. And we are doing it.

This affirmation does not mean that it is a culturally accepted position. For example, Mariah is very aware of the patriarchy that exists in Muslim and Mormon communities as she asserts: “if we did not have these kinds of husbands, we would not be able to do all these things and be in all these spaces. You could have had a typical Mormon husband or a typical Egyptian guy that will say: ‘you stay home, cook for us, you're not going anywhere.’” While no religion, according to Gross, is immune to male dominance, coming from the Zoroastrian tradition Amyra doubts that there is any doctrine that would preclude a woman from participating fully in the

⁴⁴ Braude, *Sisters and Saints: Women and American Religion (Religion in American Life)*, 91.

religion but admits that the tradition is affected by cultural gender roles and their associated distinctions as she observes women doing the teaching while men hold leadership roles. In Mariah's view this is because husbands and fathers appreciate religion, but they are not "energetic about it." Thus, the labor of constructing, reconstructing and transmitting religion is often taken on by women.⁴⁵ In fact, according to Braude "women have made religious institutions possible by providing audiences for preaching, participants for rituals, the material and financial support for religious buildings, and perhaps most important, by inculcating faith in their children to provide the next generation of participants."⁴⁶ Thus, interfaith efforts become complicated when harmful power structures within religious communities are intentionally, or not, reinforced. For example, when respect and admiration is given to those (men) who do little more than attend meetings, but the (female) labor of organizing goes unacknowledged, interfaith programs and spaces perpetuate power imbalances.

Most contributors to this project are aware of the challenges of sexism and patriarchy, so whenever possible they correct oversights, point out blind spots, and reject intentional devaluation and overt exclusion. For example, as a founding member of a prominent Southern California interfaith council, Rosalie and the other members made a point to organize their chapter with co-chairs of different genders – one man and one woman – as well as different faiths. While Rosalie has never felt less respected as a woman, she has noticed "a tendency to give the male credit" for her initiatives. But Harriet has also observed that in some interfaith space's women aren't taking credit either. Harriet recognizes that it is often the men that take up

⁴⁵ Olson, "The Influence of Your Neighbors' Religions on You, Your Attitudes and Behaviors, and Your Community," 148.

⁴⁶ Braude, *Sisters and Saints: Women and American Religion (Religion in American Life)*, 89.

a majority of the meeting time and then women are “the ones on the committee actually getting it done.”

Taking a moment to focus on identity and realize that space determines salient identities. Meaning different aspects of identity become more or less important based on the space being occupied. In the United States, non-Christian identities become apparent others. However, for all contributors, gender identity is always present and always affecting the experiences, relationships, and feelings of any given interaction in interfaith or religious spaces. Because interfaith and religious spaces are often dominated by men, it seems that there is an unwillingness and discomfort to address gender as a differentiating identity. And yet, it has colored the ways many have experienced interfaith spaces, as well as drawn attention to the limitations of certain interfaith spaces.

As Amy articulates: “It's hard to break into that group as a woman. And it's hard to break into that group as a progressive Christian. I'm Episcopalian. And it's hard to break in as a lesbian.” She continues: “It’s really hard for a woman to have a voice. The guys just talk over each other and they're loud, and they go on and on forever. And it's like everyone has to defer to the patriarchs in the room.” Similarly, Asma finds that “Muslim women have to work ten-times harder to have a mic in their hand.” Often what these women experiences is the “polarizing” choice to “be silent or get out; give up or get out; work from within or get out; be a radical (which meant getting out, usually) or a reformer (which meant staying in).”⁴⁷ This is what Aisha has observed:

You’re going to be like my mom who gets kicked out of a million spaces because, as a woman, you are fighting for truth. Or you’re going to be the woman who is

⁴⁷ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 6.

powerful and educated but you're literally feeding the same [patriarchal] information in sugar coated terms.

Since 2016 The Catholic Church in Orange County has held an interfaith memorial service to honor the lives of those who have passed away while experiencing homelessness.⁴⁸ Only two women were invited to participate in the 2019 event: Teresa (Buddhist) and Sahib (Sikh). As Teresa reflected on this event, she remembers seeing a female minister as well as a female rabbi in the audience and thought: "why aren't they up here?" In answering her own query, Teresa considered that "the two women that were represented were from, non-Christian traditions," and that "did not sit well" with her. This points to a challenge that interfaith spaces inherit from religious spaces. It is apparent that being on the margins of religious traditions, can also lead to marginality in interfaith spaces.⁴⁹ However, it seems that there is a strange reversal in interfaith spaces in which Christian women are ignored and non-Christian women become tokenized. Thus, making Gruber's point that women "can be (hyper)visible and yet, precisely for this ostensible visibility, lack a voice,"⁵⁰ all for the seeming comfort of the male (Christian) leadership. Madeline, an Episcopal Deacon, was not invited to participate, but did attend, perceiving a "sort of stiffness, especially among the Catholic priests." She observed: "They don't really know what to do with women clergy." For female religious leaders like Ida, Mildred, Francis, Teresa, Judith, Olivia, Yael, Kala, and Nellie interfaith spaces allow for their religious positions of authority to be recognized. However, one participant spoke of the strange position of female clergy as being a 'third-gender'. Outside of interfaith spaces some find it difficult to be recognized as religious leaders, but inside an interfaith space, individuals who would typically see women as subordinate are forced to recognize their religious authority. In order to do so they

⁴⁸ [Diocese hosts Homeless Persons' Interfaith Memorial Service | OC Catholic](#)

⁴⁹ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 25.

⁵⁰ Gruber, "Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak?," 55.

must ignore the gender of the person, the woman, holding that authority. The recognition of disparities in the authority that women hold within traditions and communities, and the authority that is recognized by those outside of the community, is one that is more likely to be acknowledged by other women, in and out of leadership, rather than by men or those not engaged in interfaith work.

While the Homeless Persons' Interfaith Memorial Service is promoted as an interfaith event, it is organized by the Catholic Church. By inviting members of diverse religious traditions into Christ Cathedral, this Catholic space becomes a space for interfaith engagement but is not an interfaith space. It is a Catholic space that has been opened up for an intentional purpose, but is still constrained by religious tradition. At a meeting in which the 2022 Homeless Persons' Interfaith Memorial Service was being discussed. The Catholic representative noted that he had received criticisms for the lack of diversity at past events and conceded that holding the event in a Catholic space did place certain limitations on those who were invited to participate. He did not illuminate as to what those specific limitations were but did offer that Catholic leadership would be more comfortable if the event was held at a different location or house of worship. Thus, it is apparent that diversity is a social expectation but is also a religious discomfort. A change in place allows for a space to be created that is not beholden to the imposed limitations of Catholic comfort.

At the 2009 Parliament held in Australia Rosalie attended a panel on the future of Jewish involvement in interfaith. During the question portion, a woman came to the microphone and addressed the all-male panel: "gentlemen," she said, "I am the first woman Rabbi to be ordained in Australia..." Following applause, she continued: "if you think this is the future of Judaism, not having even one woman with you on the dais, I think it's very sad. I don't want to look forward to

that future.” Attempting an explanation, one man said: “well, we tried to get someone, and she couldn't come.” Not accepting this excuse, the woman replied: “nevertheless, one cannot help but look at this Tableau and ask: Is this the future of Judaism?” The future, as Rosalie visualizes, it is not women as moderators or hostesses, the future of Judaism, and of religion in general, is “women having a prominent place” alongside the men, as this woman finished her remarks, Rosalie observed: “the men were embarrassed.... And that was good.” The embarrassment these men felt, as well as the discomfort that will be presented throughout this project, leads me to wonder: What is the affective purpose of discomfort?

Another example of the patriarchy that seeps into interfaith spaces and events was offered by Emma, Rosalie, and Francis along with other contributors. At the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions held in Salt Lake City, Utah Emma recalls the presider at one of the plenary sessions acknowledging the lack of woman on the stage, she noticed that he “was visibly uncomfortable as he looked on either side of him and named it”. Conceding that it is not unusual for voices to be missing from interfaith spaces, Emma was surprised and impressed that the oversight was acknowledged.

Spatially and Affectually Aligned

Interfaith is practically, spatially, and affectively aligned. The contributors to this project offer practical definitions that are foundational to interfaith understanding. Utilizing post-colonial geography as well as psychoanalytics allows for an understanding of interfaith that is grounded in space and affectually experienced. Spatially aligned definitions focus more on the creation of space, both figuratively and physically, then the affective experiences that will inevitably take place therein. Often the metaphor of common ground to be found, bridges to be built, and tables to be gathered around are used to spatially align interfaith motivations. These

externally focused and community driven definitions endeavor to create spaces for interaction, dialogue, and service.

In utilizing a variation on Edward Soja's thirdspace theory interfaith reaches beyond, and contends with, third space as conceptualized by Homi Bhabha.⁵¹ For Bhabha third space (two-words) is a theory that focuses on the connection of identity to community and the ways in which individuals transgress community boundaries. If we search for the physical location of these third spaces, they are the boundaries where the hybrid identity becomes recognized. Soja continues this conversation and presents thirdspace (now one-word) as the space in which "everything comes together."⁵² The thirdspace I articulate does not necessarily create a hybrid space, but works toward a thirdspace that is new and unrecognizable, that is ever expanding, radically inclusive, and exists beyond dualism.

Interfaith as a thirdspace is the epitome of what Soja envisioned as a transcendent space that is at once knowable and unimaginable.⁵³ A space "capable of juxtaposing in one place several spaces."⁵⁴ Or in this case a space capable of juxtaposing multiple religions in a way that their differences can exist. This does not mean that interfaith as a thirdspace is as utopic as their proponents claim them to be. The analysis of interfaith as a thirdspace allows for a discussion of these spaces – both real and imagined.⁵⁵ Observing those spaces in which interfaith engagement takes place, both institutionally and organically, it is clear that these spaces were never created with the explicit purpose of being interfaith spaces, even though some seem to be more hospitable to interfaith encounters than others. As a rough overview of interviews identifies these

⁵¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

⁵² Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 57.

⁵³ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." This is an opportunity to bring in a conversation of interfaith as heterotopia

⁵⁴ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, 17.

⁵⁵ Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*.

spaces as cars and civic centers, kitchens, houses of worship, homes, and hospitals, as well as schools and playgrounds. This project looks at how these spaces are created and transformed, and the engagements that take place therein.

These thirdspaces allow for individuals to feel and touch – metaphorically and physically – religious others. Using affect theory allows for the articulation of various ways in which participants feel about religion – their own religion as well as the institution of religion and its role in society. This project does not seek to form any generalizable argument about the role of interfaith in society, but the role of interfaith in individual lives. For some, interfaith encounters are a natural development of relationships formed throughout one’s life, for others interfaith involvement came after religiously infused tragedies like 9/11, hate crimes or politically motivated rhetoric. It is clear that interfaith is rarely, if ever, used for religious shopping or conversion, but as a thirdspace, that is neither home tradition nor secular, it is a space to express frustrations while also connecting to religious others.

By contributing thirdspace to the interfaith conversation, manifested in institutional and intentional ways, radical inclusivity is not necessarily the manifest function of these spaces but following Said’s observation of the colonizer, formalized interfaith might be seen as an attempt to manage the other.⁵⁶ In this view, many interfaith projects are Christian inventions that at some level have an intention, whether subconscious or not, of containing religious others in a way that allows their religious practices and beliefs to be recognized without disrupting the omnipresence of Christianity in society. This is not necessarily a condemnation, but a recognition and inquiry into the distinct ways the Christian and non-Christians experiences interfaith spaces.

⁵⁶ Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 36.

The determination of what types of relationships will be formed as a result of interfaith encounters, I argue, are determined by the orientation one has toward their own religious tradition, toward religious others, and toward religion in general. It is also possible that one can be reoriented toward religion and others through interfaith engagement. This allows me to seek for the specific ways in which the individuals in this project orient toward their own tradition; the ways in which they come to perceive and create interfaith spaces; the ways they orient toward each other; and possibly the ways in which their experiences of interfaith have reoriented themselves toward their own religion.

Moving on to the interactions that take place within interfaith spaces, I employ object relations and affect theories to further examine the relationships of individuals to their home tradition, the interfaith community and the relationships that are built. Throughout this project I call on the work of Melanie Klein, Eve Sedgwick,⁵⁷ and Lauren Berlant,⁵⁸ as well as Sara Ahmed,⁵⁹ Kathleen Stewart,⁶⁰ and Robyn Wiegman⁶¹ to make two theoretical arguments. First, as a majority of participants are traditionally religious – by sociological standards⁶² – they are nonetheless critical of aspects of their religious traditions. For those that consider themselves religious without attending or participating in traditional religious community, those that are spiritual, humanist, or practice indigenous traditions, interfaith participation holds value. Here, attempting to examine these orientations can benefit from object relations theory and an explanation of their compelling and complicated relationship to religion. Contributors are not oblivious to the tenuous position of religion in society and their participation in interfaith

⁵⁷ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.

⁵⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

⁵⁹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*; Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*.

⁶⁰ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*.

⁶¹ Wiegman, *Object Lessons*.

⁶² [Measuring Religion in Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel | Pew Research Center](#)

communities exhibit their hope of what society could be. Utilizing object relations, I engage in an investigation of the depressive positions associated with religion and the cruel optimism⁶³ that exists in interfaith spaces. By using cruel optimism to describe interfaith, similar to ways that Lauren Berlant describes the liberal state, the optimistic promises to promote tolerance, appreciative knowledge, compassion, and peace are ultimately unfulfilled. However, the relationships formed in interfaith spaces lead to a depressive position in which disappointments are experienced while hope is sustained.

Utilizing both thirdspace and affect theories helps to nuance interfaith community as an exterior creation and an interior experience. Interfaith conceptualized as a thirdspace creates spaces in which individuals can feel grounded in a tradition, along with the freedom to experience religion in new ways. Interfaith as a thirdspace can be experienced anywhere, at any time; “they can be physical, institutional, absolute spaces that are created with the express intent of cultivating interfaith experiences or they can be profane, mundane, arbitrary spaces that are transformed in an instant by the relationships that are encountered. It is not a stretch to say that some interfaith spaces become transcendent spaces for those that experience them. The creation of these thirdspaces are not necessarily institutional nor are they always geographic, but they are spaces in which individuals find and feel freedom. Spaces where the constraints of tradition, culture, patriarchy, and supremacies are alleviated, even if only momentarily. The glimpse of knowing that these spaces can exist brings hope.

⁶³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

Chapter Overview

Interfaith Communities: Relationships in Thirdspace claims that in the United States, interfaith spaces are created in institutional, intentional, and organic ways. Institutional interfaith spaces are those in which encounter with religious others are organized and formalized through community councils, events, and programs. Interfaith studies typically focuses on these institutional spaces that have general goals of education, understanding, and cooperation with religious others. Though these interfaith communities are being formed in a religiously diverse nation, they are still heavily influenced by Christianity. Intentional interfaith efforts can easily be lumped in with institutional efforts, however, this project makes the claim that there are unique differences in intentional interfaith spaces. Namely, these spaces are organized by a single faith community or are community efforts to address a specific issue. These intentional spaces have the unique goal of understanding as faith communities invite religious others into their space in order to reduce stigma. Finally, this project contributes organic interfaith to the conversation as encounters that are born from institutional and intentional interfaith spaces but are also the result of an interfaith ethic that is curious about religious others.

In order to begin a conversation about interfaith relationships, a brief overview of religion is necessary as it is the medium of interfaith engagement. Chapter one begins with a quick history of the role religion has played in the United States, including a conversation about the first amendment, the value of religious freedom, and the role of Christianity. The discussion of interfaith begins with the first major institutional interfaith event, the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, but focuses on the affect of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 2016 election of Donald Trump as moments and events that have impacted interfaith relationships, spaces, and experiences in significant ways. I also analyze the impact of secularism and pluralism as

competing ideas, and complementary resources for interfaith. Caring less about academic definitions of interfaith, this project focuses on how interfaith is experienced and defined by the contributors. Chapter one therefore, puts forth three ways in which interfaith is manifest: as an institutional project; an intentional effort; and an organic experience. In general contributors to this project are frustrated with religious and interfaith leadership and disappointed with interfaith events and efforts that value comfort over change and unity over radical inclusion but find hope in the organic interfaith spaces and relationships that have been formed.

Chapters two and three look at interfaith as a space of encounter and an affective experience. Chapter two engages the work of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault in understanding interfaith spaces as products requiring labor and heterotopias. However, the most intriguing understanding of interfaith is as a thirdspace. Borrowing and applying the work of Bhabha and Soja this chapter argues that interfaith is a thirdspace, an in-between space, that is neither a religious space nor a civic space but allows for radical inclusion of religious and non-religious identities in the work of social justice. In offering support to this claim, I compare and contrast the existence of interfaith, as a thirdspace, in India, the United States, and Israel.

Chapter three moves from a geographical understanding of interfaith to a psychoanalytic. By examining the encounters that occur in interfaith spaces and the affect experienced, this chapter presents an interfaith ethic. An interfaith ethic, as derived from the contributors, consists of curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality. These characteristics, I argue, not only make up an interfaith ethic, but are what motivate individuals to enter interfaith spaces to begin with. These characteristics are cultivated by contributors not only in their engagement with religious others, but within their own religious communities and other social spaces. Throughout this chapter it

becomes apparent that an interfaith ethic is developed throughout one's life and is useful for engagement with various forms of diversity.

Once the spatial and affectual analysis has been completed, chapter four presents interfaith as a type of lived religion, or a way of living out ones religion. This chapter argues that interfaith is a space in which contributors can live out their religious commitments to social justice. In understanding the importance of space and affect on interfaith motivations, experiences, contributions, and critiques this chapter focuses on affiliations of contributors with Christian and non-Christian religion. In addition, this chapter takes the opportunity to consider who is missing from interfaith spaces and why. Contributors specifically identify a lack of interfaith participation from the LGBTQIA+ community, Evangelicals, Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics, as well as Indigenous peoples. While each of these groups have different reasons for not participating in interfaith spaces, contributors offer a desire for comfort and a lack of inclusion as general explanations.

Chapter five presents interfaith as a creative space of engagement that allows for religion to be critiqued and repaired. Experimenting with object relations, this chapter offers interfaith as a transitional object that can help repair one's relationship to other objects, namely religions and religious communities, without necessarily returning to them. This final chapter examines the critiques, ambivalences, and creativity that contributors exhibit as a result of being in interfaith spaces. This chapter also examines the responsibilities that contributors feel that they have toward each other. As contributors enter interfaith spaces with complicated motivations, nonetheless hopeful for what interfaith can do, this chapter and the project ends with what the future holds for interfaith, as predicted by the contributors.

Chapter 1 Religion (and Interfaith) in America: History and Definitions

In order to understand the motivations, experiences, critiques, and contributions of women and non-binary folks that participate in interfaith spaces, we first need to understand the role religion plays in American society. This chapter focuses on religion as central to the American narrative, and therefore central to the narrative of interfaith in America. While this chapter traces a brief history of the invention and perpetuation of interfaith in America from the 1893 Parliament of World's Religions through 9/11 and the Trump Presidency, the fundamental argument of this chapter is that interfaith in America is affected by Christianity. The chapter ends with the categorizations of interfaith as institutional, intentional, and organic along with critiques and benefits as presented by contributors.

David Sehat in *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* presented three specific myths. For the purposes of this project, I consider the role interfaith plays in supporting or rectifying these myths. I will first engage the separation myth as a requirement for the religious freedom myth to exist. To be clear, no 'wall of separation' exists between church and state, but there is "a prohibition against the state's acting to grant establishment status to any particular religion."⁶⁴ The purpose of the establishment and free exercise clauses of the constitution are to insure that, as Stephen Prothero points out, "the US government is secular by law" and "religious by choice."⁶⁵ Diana Eck submits that these "twin principles of religious freedom and non-establishment"⁶⁶ grant the opportunity to talk about religion without promoting religion. However, one contributor, Margaret (Unitarian Universalist) is not fooled by these myths.

⁶⁴ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 54.

⁶⁵ Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, 22.

⁶⁶ Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, 384.

Margret's observation is that "the United States is pretty much considered a Christian country." And her experiences with social and political actions are in line with Vine Deloria's argument that Christianity "is the root cause" of the United States "inability to respect or tolerate those who are different."⁶⁷ It seems that Christians that participate in interfaith spaces are attempting to rectify this issue. Which might be why, Zhang (Bahai) seems to believe that "in this county, when it comes to interfaith, it is Christian dominated."

While efforts to maintain a separation of church and state, according to Joan Scott, have "relegated [religion] to the realm of the private,"⁶⁸ it does not remove its influence. According to the First Amendment, the state's main objective is to ensure an individual's right to "believe, speak, and act – individually and in community with others, in private and in public – in accord with their understanding of ultimate truth."⁶⁹ For some, like Sehat and Scott, there is a perception that the push to silence religion is actually a push to privilege the religion that already has influence – Christianity.⁷⁰ Thus a focus on separation leads to a society that is "void of information about religion"⁷¹ but has a normalized Christian culture and values. As a Jewish person, Rachel's experience with Christianity is "ubiquitous in both its secular and religious forms." Therefore, while Christian conservatives and secular liberals alike promote these myths, each to their own ends, Sehat determines that these myths were begun and maintained by and for the benefit of the Christian majority.⁷² As Christianity claims its neutrality in the public square, it pulses through the veins of the nation, almost "indistinguishable from dominant economic,

⁶⁷ Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*.

⁶⁸ Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 12.

⁶⁹ [First Amendment to the United States Constitution - Wikipedia](#)

⁷⁰ Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 33.

⁷¹ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 10.

⁷² Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 8.

nationalist, and military interests.”⁷³ By promoting religious freedom Christians return themselves to the seat of power, and the saviors of the moral soul of America.

This leads to a conversation of the third myth, the myth of secularism. Religion has not lost its affect. In a post-secular society interfaith is proof that the fear of religious decline is unfounded, however the loss of Christian influence may become more real. In a nation that has always been both secular and Christian,⁷⁴ the ideal of separation should legitimize secularism as the choice to not be religious. However, in reality, the myth of separation protects against claims of religious (Christian) influence, utilizing notions of secularism as proof that the separation of Church and State remains intact.

To those who believe that the United States is a Christian nation, as well as those who advocate for religious freedom as a founding principle, secularism poses a challenge. According to Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen, secularism's invention was intended to promote peace, universalism, and rationality, while also condemning religion as incompatible with these values. And yet, Paul Tillich tells us that religion is “the expression of humanity’s ultimate concern.”⁷⁵ To say that those concerns do not include peace and rationality is short sighted. Regardless of the religious tradition or secular worldview, ultimate concerns must be addressed. Interfaith is one of the spaces in which that can happen, because ultimate concerns are recognized as mutual concerns.⁷⁶ The universal morals of religion are made visible through interfaith dialogue, but so too are the moral positions and ethical practices that exist without a religious connection. Therefore, I argue that interfaith is a response to, not a rejection of, secularism which can

⁷³ Ammerman, “The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity,” 164.

⁷⁴ Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, 22.

⁷⁵ Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, 2.

⁷⁶ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 84.

provide a unique opportunity to include diverse positions in the conversation of both religious and civic pluralism.

While it is true that America has always been both secular and Christian, it has also always been “both Christian and pluralistic.”⁷⁷ One of the complex contentions of this project is that interfaith plays a unique role in countering the secularization myth. Borrowing from Gross, we can see that “rather than being antireligious, secularism makes space for all religions,” and no religion as well.⁷⁸ This project also maintains, to some degree, the myth of religious freedom, and complicating the space of separation by providing potential space to counter Christian dominance. When Christian dominance is obscured, the perception of religious freedom is maintained which Rachel (Jewish) warns, “will do more damage” because the concerns and experiences of non-Christian Americans will be ignored.

Interfaith projects in America often romanticize or over-determine the ideal of religious freedom as the foundation of pluralism. Eboo Patel claims the promise of religious freedom enables non-Christians, who struggle to be seen as American, to endure suffering.⁷⁹ For example, Native Americans confronted with an imposing government, had to adapt and challenge conceptions of religion, in order to survive. Similarly, Japanese American Buddhists that were interned during the second World War chose to believe in the constitutional promise of religious freedom and would therefore not “succumb to the pressure to become Christian.”⁸⁰ More recently Muslim and Sikh Americans are constantly contending and demanding that America

⁷⁷ Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, 25.

⁷⁸ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What's the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 10.

⁷⁹ Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, 16.

⁸⁰ Williams, *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War*, 106.

honor its promise. Postcolonial is a haunting of the colonialists by the marginalized that claim access to the “American dream.”⁸¹

The strong impulse of interfaith activists to paint the United States as an exceptional nation, does not overtly reject the prominence of Christianity in US history but focus on a history that centers the plurality of religions, rather than a distinctively Christian heritage.⁸² Eck and Patel define religious plurality as an engagement with religious diversity to a positive end. Taking a more critical view of pluralism, Bender and Kassen point out that “pluralism, variously specified as cultural, political, legal, or religious, has come to represent a powerful ideal meant to resolve the question of how to get along in a conflict-ridden world.”⁸³ In other words, the presence of different identities may lead to conflict, but recognition of diversity offers the potential for positive engagements.⁸⁴ Therefore, this project understand pluralism as involving “more than mere coexistence” which is a minimal obligation, but actually requires “engagement across traditions.”⁸⁵ However, as Zhang (Bahai) acknowledges there is no guarantee of a positive outcomes when people come together, especially when “we don’t understand each other.” Thus, there are critiques to be made of the oversimplification and reliance on pluralism which at times “obscures both internal diversity and external connections.”⁸⁶ Regardless, according to Eck and Patel, pluralism is the promise of religious freedom fulfilled.

⁸¹ Bruyneel, *Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial of U.S.-Indigenous Relations*, 19.

⁸² Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*.

⁸³ Bender and Kassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, 1.

⁸⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 50.

⁸⁵ Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 104.

⁸⁶ Jakobsen, Janet in Bender and Kassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, 33.

The 9/11 and Trump Experience

Both Judith (Protestant) and Amy (Protestant) see 9/11 as a turning point for the country. Living in northern California at the time, Amy remembers the congregation from the local synagogue going to the Mosque and forming a circle of protection. Similarly, immediately after the attacks, Judith found herself at the local mosque along with other members of the community offering their support.

In September of 2001 Shaheen began graduate school at Harvard University in Boston and her parents joined her as she settled into her new apartment. In preparation for the move, Shaheen's father let his tenants know that he would be out of town at the beginning of September. When September 11th happened, the new tenants who did not know Shaheen's father "called the feds" concerned that their new Muslim landlord, that happened to be in Boston, was somehow connected to the attacks. But the interfaith relationships that Shaheen and her family had begun to cultivate the moment they moved to the United States from Bangladesh in the early 80's paid off. They spent decades building mutual trust with their small midwestern community, and in the wake of 9/11 the community that once sent them death threats were by their side to support them and push back against islamophobia. After a week of being questioned by the FBI, Shaheen's parents returned to their small town to find "food, flowers, and cards in front of the door" with messages of love and support.⁸⁷ Though the new tenants did not know them, and allowed their ignorance and fear to drive action, the community that they had been a part of for nearly 20 years was not shaken. Shaheen's experience underscores what 20 years of interfaith work has taught

⁸⁷ Williams, *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in The Second World War*, 299. Thankfully Milia's family had a different experience than Japanese American's during WW2, who as Williams points out, were "living alongside neighbors who had supported their forced removal... Japanese Americans legally returning to California had reason to fear they would not be welcomed home" (229)

Zainab, that “in troubling times it’s your neighbors that are closest to you.” For Dorothy (Catholic), who had been involved in community interfaith councils since 1995, 9/11 exemplified the need and strength of “personal connection.” Reflecting on her experiences, they seem to mirror Shaheen: “I think about the way, as a community, we responded. People were really concerned” about their friends in the Muslim community.

As a Sikh American, born and raised in the United States, Sahib remembers being greeted with “Assalamu Alaikum,” a traditional Islamic greeting, from members of her New Jersey community who did not know the difference between Sikhs and Muslims. Sahib would often just reply “Salaam” because at the time “it didn’t matter what they thought we were.” Post 9/11, what they thought they were, was terrorists. It became clear to Sahib that “Sikhs were going to be targeted.”⁸⁸ Indeed, Linda (Muslim) acknowledged that Sikhs “get accused of being Muslim all the time, and they’ve suffered for that.” In fact, the sad reality is that Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American, was the first person to be killed in a hate crime after 9/11. Sophia remembers seeing members of the Sikh community on TV asserting “we’re not Muslim” which unintentionally solidified an association between Islam and terrorism. Both Muslims and Sikhs had to denounce their association with terrorism. Sophia and Sahib have been part of a concerted effort to highlight the difference between Sikhi, Islam, and Hinduism without promoting the damnation and vitriol that many have toward non-Christians. David Seitz asks us to consider: “what are the affective conditions under which differently marginalized people might engage in meaningful solidarity and reciprocal intimacy with one another?”⁸⁹ While some minority groups try to protect themselves by declaring: “We are not terrorists,” the subtext equate terrorism with Islam.

⁸⁸ Jasjit

⁸⁹ Seitz, *A House of Prayer for All People: Contesting Citizenship in a Queer Church*, 227.

Other minority groups take the opportunity to not only protect themselves, but also protect religious others by proclaiming: “We are not terrorists, and neither are they.”

For Sophia, who was “the only brown kid” of “South Asian decent” in her school, 9/11 was the beginning of being called “Osama’s daughter,” having french fries thrown in her face at lunch, getting her hair pulled, coming home to her dad cleaning eggs off of their home, being yelled at to “get out of this country” by someone in a Rite Aid parking lot, hearing her brother being called a “towel head” and “terrorist,” receiving death threats through AOL instant messenger, and brought the realization that “people hate us.” It was also the beginning of a new identity as a Sikh representative. Sophia confided in her English teacher who then invited Sophia to share her experiences with the class. Reflecting, Sophia acknowledges that “it was very cathartic,” and she is grateful that her teacher had “hope in the students.” This affective experience helped to not only increase Sophia’s pride in her Sikh tradition, but also foster relationships, in an intentional way, with Jewish and Muslim students who had also experienced persecution in the aftermath of 9/11. It was “the first time” that she realized that “these poor Muslim kids went through the same thing” she did, and the Jewish kids “went through something similar.” When a Muslim woman shared the experience of being told to take off her hijab, Sophia remembered how she felt hearing someone tell her brother to take off his turban.

These communal experiences of resonance created a type of what Lauren Berlant calls an intimate public. An intimate public is “a site in which citizens can both feel their linkage to one another through the nation and negotiate their relation to the transnational.”⁹⁰ For those non-Christian and non-white minorities the experiences of being othered in the aftermath of 9/11 created a “particular... worldview and emotional knowledge” that came from the “broadly

⁹⁰ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, 14.

common historical experience” of being suspect and the weight of expectation to prove allegiance to (Christian) America post-9/11.⁹¹

At an interfaith council meeting following 9/11 a member of the Muslim community pleaded for help in addressing Islamophobia. Through tears, Mildred recalls this gentleman expressing his pain and fear on behalf of his community: “our women are afraid to go out and our children can’t go to school because they’re calling them terrorists.” Hearing this, Mildred decided, after consulting with some Muslim friends, to wear hijab for seven days in solidarity with the Muslim community. She conducted her Sunday sermon, officiated at a funeral, and went shopping all while wearing hijab, providing Mildred with the opportunity to speak about Islam with the intent of garnering support for the Muslim members of the community and declaring their American-ness. While waiting at the Post Office, a woman, appearing to be of Asian descent, looked at Mildred and said: “You don’t look Muslim.” Mildred’s initial response was: “What do you think a Muslim looks like?” Assuming this woman’s Asian ancestry, Mildred attempted to generate connection by explaining that she resonated with friends impacted by Japanese concentration camps and declared: “Something like that must never happen again.” This specific example brings the “white savior complex,” or to be blunt, a “Christian savior complex” into the conversation of interfaith. As many white Christians congratulate themselves for entering interfaith spaces, becoming uncomfortable for a few hours or a week, as proof of their goodness. This example also points out a benevolent prejudice that led to the assumption that resonance is inevitable, when in fact Mildred was forcing a similarity. This does not mean, however, that recognizing commonalities between different communities that are all facing discrimination can’t resonate.

⁹¹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*.

If we can recognize each other as being partners in fighting discrimination and Islamophobia and antisemitism... rather than thinking I need to fight just what affects me... we could come out feeling stronger and feeling like there's more of us and I would consider that to be very successful, - Rachel (Jewish)

Thus, Yael's motivation to do interfaith work echoes Mildred's. As a Jewish person engaging in interfaith work and creating interfaith spaces, is guided by the intimate public experience of being a non-Christian American. She believes that "if everybody in the country saw Muslim people as Americans, we would be in a very different place than we are right now." And this is true for Sikhs, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and non-White Christians as well. Yael continues: "I think as a Jew I am particularly sensitive to that just because of what led up to the Holocaust which is the idea that Jews couldn't be German." What many of the non-Christian contributors to this project are constantly laboring for is an America that sees non-Christians as vital to the fabric of society and are American.

Two months after 9/11, Yael took it upon herself to organize an interfaith solidarity service. Even now, after twenty years interfaith services, vigils, and solidarity marches, she hears a common refrain: "it shouldn't take a catastrophe for people to come together" and yet, it still does. With the campaign and election of Donald Trump in 2016 came a new wave of Islamophobia and antisemitism. Post-9/11 America as well as the post Trump presidency created political motivation for many non-Christians to get involved in interfaith and community work and to "get out there and explain who we are."⁹² While the post-9/11 religious response of those minority groups who were indiscriminately targeted was to segregate in order to survive, years of building interfaith relationships led to an acknowledgment that an attack on one community is felt by others. Yael explains: "[Trump] had denigrated so many different subsets of people in this country... I felt that Muslims and women had been so disrespected by the acceptance of

⁹² Jasjit

[Trump].” So, Yael (Jewish) decided to plan an interfaith women’s Seder for the Jewish holiday of Passover. It was an opportunity to bring communities together in a more productive way than trying to deal with intolerance on their own.

Standing emotionally distraught in the middle of the playground at her children’s school another parent “made the mistake” of asking Asma (Muslim) how she was doing. “I started telling him that my son had a Cub Scout meeting, and everyone was supposed to share what service means them. They wanted [the boys] to say the name of their religion, and what the religion teaches them about service. When they got to my son, who’s usually a very vocal Muslim, he said, “I don’t know, I don’t have a religion.” When I heard this, I asked him: “Why did you say that?” He said: “I didn’t want all the boys to make fun of me because nobody likes Muslims.” The parent, who also happened to be a rabbi, suggested that Asma talk to his wife, who is also a rabbi. From these conversations, Asma was inspired to gather a “mishmash” of women from all areas of her life – a parent from her children’s school, a few coworkers, and friends from her mosque join her at the LA Women’s March in January of 2017.⁹³

Looking at these examples and definitions, we can begin to answer Kate McCarthy question: “Are interfaith encounters pragmatic, strategic affairs aimed at resolving problems or achieving common ends, or are they more deeply dialogical?”⁹⁴ Answer: Yes. As a pragmatic institutional endeavor to engage religious diversity, a strategic intentional encounter with religious others, and an organic experience with affectual repercussions. With each of these

⁹³ After the election of Donald Trump in November of 2016, a world-wide protest was planned for the day after his inauguration on January 21, 2017. For interfaith women and non-binary folks joining this demonstration was in response to the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the presidency.

⁹⁴ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 13.

conceptualizations, the benefits and challenges as presented by contributors to the project are highlighted.

Interfaith: History and Definitions

Patel defines interfaith as:

Inter- how we relate to the diversity around us. Faith – how we orient around the key symbols of our religious traditions. Interfaith – how our orientation around our religious traditions impacts the relationship we have with the diversity around us, and how our relationships with the diversity around us shape the way we orient around our religious traditions.⁹⁵

While this packaged definition is clear, my goal is to break it down even more, complicate it, and look at interfaith (as well as intra-faith⁹⁶) from the various perspectives of the contributors. America has provided us with religious diversity. Now we must investigate the orientations we have toward religion and toward religious others.

Interfaith in America is the product of diversity in America and according to Nancy Ammerman, that diversity has been the catalyst for “religious inventiveness and experimentation.”⁹⁷ The modern interfaith movement traces its origins to the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair which hosted the first Parliament of the World’s Religions. It is important to note that this ‘first’ interfaith gathering was not all inclusive, and explicitly excluded religious groups such as Mormons, Native Americans and other indigenous people, as well as Sikhs. While Islam was included, it was represented by a white convert. While there were some interfaith efforts leading up to the twenty-first century, most notably the second Parliament held 100 years later in 1993; interfaith efforts were not widely revitalized in the United States until after the terrorist

⁹⁵ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promises of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 138.

⁹⁶ Intra-faith: same religion but subscribes to a different denomination or sect.

⁹⁷ Ammerman, “The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity,” 163.

attacks of September 11, 2001. While The Parliament offers the ultimate example of an organized interfaith effort, spurred by the protestant Christian imagination in the wake of ever increasing non-Christian religious diversity, interfaith efforts post 9/11 were, for the most part, community-based grassroots responses to, and rejection of, religiously based terrorism. Both moments recognized America's changing religious landscape and attempted to address it in positive ways.

In 1991 Eck began the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, focusing on the “increasingly diverse religious communities in the Boston area” and eventually the rest of the United States.⁹⁸ The institutionalization of interfaith efforts, beyond an awareness of religious diversity, or encounters with religious others for a specific purpose, exponentially grew after 9/11.⁹⁹ Interfaith participation typically arises in response to a particular event.¹⁰⁰ For example, 9/11 served as a pivotal moment in individual interfaith stories. Some interfaith councils were created prior to 9/11 as a social project to combat gang violence¹⁰¹ or white supremacist uprisings¹⁰², but few contributors to this project became involved in interfaith until after 9/11. 9/11 thrust Muslim and Sikh contributors into an interfaith world, seemingly overnight.

When Zainab (Muslim) was a teen in San Francisco in the 80's, her grandmother passed away. She remembers neighbors dropping off food purchased from the Halal market. Reflecting, Zainab is impressed “that neighbor knew us so well and wanted to provide something... When you are able to have neighbors that know who you are and step up to be there for you... I think

⁹⁸ [Mission & History | The Pluralism Project](#)

⁹⁹ [9/11 Became a Catalyst for Interfaith Relations and Cooperation - Interfaith America](#)

¹⁰⁰ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 86.

¹⁰¹ Anaheim Religious Community Council (AARC) began in 1993 in response to drug and gang activity. [Anaheim Religious Community Council | Anaheim, CA - Official Website](#)

¹⁰² The Greater Huntington Beach Interfaith Council started in 1996 in response to white supremacist hate crimes. [Our History | My Site \(ghbic1.org\)](#). An interfaith council that at least 11 contributors have participate with.

that kind of explains it all.” And yet, Zainab’s experience was one in which communities she had been part of her whole life, within a day were looking at her differently. This was when she realized the need for a “formalized way of connecting and standing up for one another.”

While this project focuses on the specific motivations and experiences of contributors, most of who did not engage in interfaith efforts until after 9/11, there is an opportunity to make note of interfaith encounters throughout history. While the first religious encounters in America, namely Native Americans with colonizers as well as those Africans who were forced onto the American shore bringing with them religious practices and indigenous traditions, cannot be considered interfaith, this religious history is one in which Christianity was used to justify control of religious others. In the mid-1800’s when Mormonism was founded, the Prophet Joseph Smith exhibited an interfaith ethic as a means of survival. Writing in his journal (9 July, 1843): “[I]f it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a Mormon, I am bold to declare before heaven that I am just as ready to die for a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or any other denomination.”¹⁰³ Most interfaith councils that were formed in the mid-20th century began as ecumenical councils¹⁰⁴ and may have been influenced by the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights acknowledgement of religion in article 18. One of the most famous interfaith relationships is that of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who marched from Selma to Montgomery together in 1965. From Civil Rights to the AIDS crisis to natural disasters interfaith cooperation has been leveraged for the benefit of society. That does not mean that religious understanding or diverse religious inclusion were always present. Regardless, as both David Sehat and Kathleen Sands attest, “Reformers of all kinds, including

¹⁰³ The Joseph Smith Papers, 300

¹⁰⁴ Newport Mesa Irvine Interfaith Council, founded in 1978, began as an ecumenical council. [About Us \(nmiinterfaithcouncil.org\)](http://nmiinterfaithcouncil.org). It is one local example of an interfaith council that at least 13 contributors have associated with.

abolitionists, women's rights activists, labor organizers, and educational reformers"¹⁰⁵ contend with religion, but are also motivated by religion, that can be "a bridge to public life."¹⁰⁶

In the evolution to what is known as interfaith today, there has been a shift from an ecumenical Christian effort that eventually included Judaism and Islam, to inter-religious projects that praised Christian participants for their tolerance of religious others. Betty remembers an ecumenical effort to address the Ethiopian famine in the 1980's. Also in the 80's Nellie was part of a group of gay Catholics and Jews that came together to raise awareness about the AIDS epidemic. On the other hand, Harriet, who was raised in a conservative Christian home was taught that "interfaith was a dirty word... for lukewarm Christians." Zainab remembers a period of time when the emphasis was placed on tolerance. Many, including Talal Asad, critique tolerance as being too passive; as a promotion of the "liberal impulse for neutrality that is determined by a specific [Christian] form of "civilization."¹⁰⁷ Tolerance can also be critiqued based on the foundational understanding that in order for one group to tolerate another, there is a preconceived assumption that the other has beliefs or practices that are "wrong, mistaken, or undesirable" and yet endured.¹⁰⁸ While it is true that "personal friendships with members of an outgroup may lead to tolerance toward outgroups in general,"¹⁰⁹ most modern interfaith efforts have moved past tolerance, but fall short of 'radical inclusion' – which has become a goal of most of the contributors. Pulling from scholars like Robert Wuthnow and Eck interfaith can generally be defined as diverse religious groups, and individuals affiliated with a religious tradition or philosophical world view, coming together "despite their differences,"¹¹⁰ committed

¹⁰⁵ Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Levitt, "Chapter 4," 315.

¹⁰⁷ Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ Leiter, "Why Tolerate Religion?" 2.

¹⁰⁹ Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami, "Intergroup Contact: The Past, Present, and the Future," 13.

¹¹⁰ Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 102.

to cooperation, understanding, and inclusion. Some critique current interfaith projects that seek to expand the borders of inclusion and claim that it will eventually devolve into multiculturalism.

Attempting to nuance what understanding, cooperation, and radical inclusion looks like in practical and personal terms, this project attends to the relational and spatial definitions of interfaith as presented by contributors. As a relationship, interfaith requires understanding and cooperation. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize that misunderstandings and disagreements are inevitable, as they are in any relationship. Though interfaith marriage¹¹¹ elicits the most focus in the discussion of interfaith relationships; and while seven contributors come from homes in which their parents were in an inter- or intra-faith relationships, and six are currently in an interfaith marriage, this project takes direction from HyeRan Kim Cragg who acknowledges that “interreligious relationships are on the rise due to migration in the religiously pluralistic postcolonial world.”¹¹² I contend that the study of interfaith should be no different. For example, Savitri’s Hindu grandmother ‘adopted’ her windowed Muslim neighbor as her own daughter, including her in all the celebrations and family rituals. When Savitri’s grandmother was questioned by a Hindu priest as to why “this Muslim woman” is included, Savitri remembers her grandmother saying: “She is my oldest daughter, we can’t begin without her.” This is a beautiful example of an intimate relationship forged outside of law or blood.

As a non-religious interfaith participant, Johnny defines interfaith as a relationship between individuals who are determined “to create unity and community” and are “intentionally coming together to understand each other's views without having to change somebody's mind.”

¹¹¹ Scheitle and Smith, “A Note on the Frequency and Sources of Close Interreligious Ties,” 410.

¹¹² Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

As articulated by many contributors, Shaheen expresses that “interfaith is not about us saying that we are all the same, because we are not.” Beyond this, Fatima is adamant that interfaith relationships are not to be based on expectations that the other will “change” or “tweak” their beliefs to make you more comfortable, nor will they change to make their beliefs more “digestible enough for somebody else.” In fact, from Ida’s perspective interfaith helps to deepen personal convictions. Therefore, it is important to affirm that interfaith is not about “imposing religion”¹¹³ or “converting to another religion.”¹¹⁴ For Amy, the hope is that interfaith can eventually be a place where no one has to change their theology to be in the room, and everyone is able to be “who we are.” In her mind, this is when interfaith will be a powerful force for good.

Interfaith is a cultural phenomenon that is related to, but is not, religion. It is a space that is socially constructed by those with personal theologies, belief systems, and faith practices. But, regardless of the desire of these individuals to be inclusive, the very nature of searching for a definition is the act of searching for a boundary. Choices to affirm and celebrate or delegitimize and condemn are often made in the interest of maintaining control.¹¹⁵ One boundary set by at least three contributors explicitly excludes Scientology from interfaith spaces. A few other contributors noted their discomfort with including atheists and pagans. Reflecting on this challenge Shaheen (Muslim) discovered how complicated the word ‘faith’, in interfaith, can be. Questioning: “if we have faith in our title... [are we] consciously excluding people?” Then she considered the alternative of not including the word faith: “Are we not honoring all those people [for whom] faith plays a central part of their identity?” To which Catherine (Protestant) argues:

It actually doesn't matter what I think interfaith means. It matters whether people feel included in something that has the word interfaith in the title... Everybody

¹¹³ Farrah

¹¹⁴ Rebecca

¹¹⁵ Bruyneel, *Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial of U.S.-Indigenous Relations*, 14.

should be able to be involved in something that has the word interfaith in it... All that really matters is that they believe that everybody has the right to believe what they want to believe.

While there are multiple personal definitions, Francis points out that there is no “all-encompassing definition that satisfies everyone.” Regardless, Shaheen urges everyone who engages in interfaith work to have “a clear definition for themselves.”

As a space, interfaith allows for engagement, education, and relationship building. In addition, Johnny feels interfaith should be a safe space in which perspectives are exchanged and resonance is felt. As an educational space, interfaith has the opportunity to help the United States correct its religious ignorance. Because while “faith without works” might be dead, Prothero warns that “faith without knowledge is dangerous.”¹¹⁶ For example, in the aftermath of 9/11 Sikhs, Muslims, and South Asian Christians have suffered because of the conflation of religious affiliations with ethnic and racial identities to those who committed the terrorist attacks. Rosalie (Jewish) offers a specific example. Not long after 9/11 Rosalie saw a billboard that read: “God and Allah need to talk.” Her initial reaction was to chuckle, but then she realized that the belief that God and Allah are separate is a core problem in the world, rooted in religious ignorance. Looking back on post-9/11 experiences, many contributors, (specifically Christian) acknowledged their discomfort with and ignorance of religious others. While Judit Maschkovich would not hold these contributors responsible for “the roots of this ignorance” Maschkovich does believe they are “responsible for the transformation of this ignorance.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, many enter interfaith spaces in an attempt to eradicate that ignorance.

¹¹⁶ Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, 146.

¹¹⁷ Maschkovich, “But I Know You, American Woman,” 73.

As a white, middle-class, Christian woman, Martha reflects on 9/11 as “a tough time in our country. There was a lot of hatred and phobia toward Islam.” Rather than accepting the hateful opinions of others Martha thought, “you know, I really don’t know any Muslims.” This realization led her to forge relationships with Muslims in her community. Recognizing that in all faiths, including her own, there are “bad apples,” Martha refused to allow the actions of some color her view of all. So, she explains: “I went on a mission to know Muslim women.” She found opportunities to do service projects with Muslim women and discovered that “their fears and concerns for their children” were no different than hers. But, she continued, “that was a bridge that I had not ever been given the opportunity to cross.” This method of engagement through service has been employed by many, and what Martha (Mormon) has found is that engaging in service with religious others, “arms go down” and those serving “become more vulnerable.” Meaning people become more willing to engage with religious others, with out being defensive.

Some version of the question: “What does interfaith even offer?” was asked to all contributors, Leslie’s response:

Seriously? Nothing. Is that terrible? That's terrible and horrible because I know that interfaith is important. I feel so conflicted. I feel conflicted because I don't know if I know it's important, or if I've been told it so many times that it's inside me now. But I think that if interfaith was non-existent that would probably not be a good thing.

Beyond relationships and spaces, interfaith does something, it is an experience, it is affectual, it motivates action. 33 contributors believe interfaith to be a space in which social change, social justice, or social action can and should take place. As a humanist, Emma comes to define and create interfaith, or what she calls “inter-worldview,” as a space that allows for the appreciation of the values professed in religion, as well as those that are not. Whether a social necessity or a socialized expectation women and non-binary contributors define interfaith as a

coming together of people from different religions, faith traditions, as well as non-religious worldviews, along with different ideologies, identities, and cultural backgrounds with the express purpose of learning about, and from, each other in order to understand each other and do good together.

Interfaith is a dynamic process of relationship building that takes place in multiple spaces. Institutional interfaith spaces are created when a group of religious others formally organize for a specific purpose. Intentional interfaith spaces are created when a religious space or event is opened up for religious others to enter and experience. Organic interfaith space is created when religious others enter the same space. In these spaces, religious identity is not necessarily a motivating factor but eventually become important to the interaction.

Institutional Interfaith

According to McCarthy “Interfaith work in the United States is no longer the informal efforts of a few open-minded communities but a well-established, organizationally sophisticated, and increasingly mainstream phenomenon.”¹¹⁸ The key attributes of institutional interfaith spaces are that they take place in physical space, they are made evident by their large gatherings and hierarchical structures, and are motivated by educational objectives.

Conceived in 1960 and opened in 2004 the interfaith center at a private Southern California University is a space for people to gather, void of specific religious heredity. Though the university was founded by a Christian tradition, the building was constructed from the ground up as an interfaith space, not a converted Christian space with lingering memories. Abigail sees the interfaith center, and interfaith spaces in general, as vital for relationship

¹¹⁸ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 85.

building. Reasoning that “if you don’t provide a space” then people will “silo.” What she means is that if there isn’t a designated space for engagement, then people will do what they have always done, they will go where they feel comfortable, they will stay in their own communities. By creating a new space, and not converting an old one, the chance of comfort increases. That is not to say that creating an interfaith space means that it will fill with religious diversity, it still takes individual desire and effort to enter this space, but the space creates the opportunity.

Other institutional interfaith examples that were brought up by contributors are The Parliament of the World’s Religions, United Religions Initiative (URI), and local community interfaith councils that formalize by creating boards and in some cases declaring 501c3 non-profit status. These interfaith organizations create and produce events and programs with the purpose of cooperation and understanding. For example, these institutional interfaith efforts consist of council meetings, religious lectures, panel discussions on topics of common interest, Thanksgiving services, National Day of Prayer breakfasts, community banquets, memorial and vigil services after tragedies, and community service projects. Gross notes that these events and “large meetings... can be exciting, and certainly many people can benefit” however, “they are not very effective for intensive, sustained discussions of major topics and may well not produce lasting or significant results.”¹¹⁹ Employing institutional spaces as educational spaces is often the most efficient way to create religious literacy, which is what Johnny (non-religious) appreciates. Though Kala (Tongva elder) critiques that having community leaders sit on a stage and share their thoughts on a given topic might help audience members learn about a specific subject, they

¹¹⁹ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What’s the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 284.

rarely create an opportunity to build relationships.¹²⁰ What these spaces and events must guard against universalizing religious beliefs, as well as tokenizing religious practitioners. Though most non-Christians participate in interfaith spaces as a way to dispel stereotypes, as well as proactively protecting their communities from prejudice and discrimination, and yet many do end up doing this labor. Borrowing from Judit Moschkovich non-Christians should not be expected to “explain and defend”¹²¹ their traditions. For example, Fatima (Muslim) has often experienced being invited into an interfaith space, and regardless of the topic, ends up being asked about terrorism and her experiences as a covered woman in America.

Typically, these institutional interfaith organizations and spaces take on a hierarchical structure, with leadership positions and political pressures. As McCarthy noted, and as many contributors have experienced, “some councils restrict membership to clergy” while others consist of representatives from various religious and civic organizations, and still others are made up of community members that may or may not have support from their religious institution.¹²² Regardless, these spaces and their organizers are singularly focused on the goals of understanding and cooperation, therefore efforts to educate and create unity become the preeminent motivators. Typically, according to McCarthy, institutional interfaith efforts are “aimed at helping different religious groups live together,” “solving a shared community problem,” or searching “for religious truth in a pluralistic context.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Patel argues that “the key leverage points in building religious pluralism are appreciative knowledge and meaningful relationships” therefore, “interfaith organizations can design their programs to increase these two factors” (80)

¹²¹ Moschkovich, “But I Know You, American Woman.”

¹²² McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 85.

¹²³ McCarthy, 20.

While Elif is grateful for the “nuggets” of wisdom she has gleaned from different traditions in institutional spaces, Kala struggles with the breaking apart of traditions into digestible bits, lamenting those events that invite indigenous representatives to function as “tokens.” Both Emma and Kala are frustrated by the expectations that organizers place on representatives to ‘show and tell’ in a short period of time, the sacred teachings that have taken a lifetime to learn. Kala shares:

It's very difficult for people who walk the traditional way to share in these spaces because you're giving a very small amount of time, whether it's 10, 15 minutes, 20 minutes or even a couple of hours, it's still a very short time, to be able to impart onto people, a way of life, a way of being aware.... And their [is a] thirst for this knowledge. [But, we] have to also ask [ourselves], how is it going to benefit? What are they going to do with this knowledge?... We can talk about reciprocity, that's a big thing for us. If you're going to become better stewards to the land, then me speaking to you, me giving my time is totally worth it... But if you're not willing to open your mind, or to grow, then it's pointless.

What Kala is critiquing is the tendency of Christians to create these spaces and then exploit labor from non-Christian minorities. These should not be spaces where “the oppressed educate the oppressor,”¹²⁴ where the burden of teaching is on the minority community,¹²⁵ or participants are “spoon-fed”¹²⁶ information. This is not only an indigenous critique; many participants find it difficult to synthesize their truths in ways that are meaningful to those in attendance while also guarding against appropriation. Betty (Protestant) has observed the Christian expectation of religious others to be “experts in their faith... when most of us are far from educated in our own traditions.” Therefore, these spaces are not meant to offer downloadable content, google can do that, but to provide affectual experiences that benefit the individual and the community. Beyond the possible discontent that Kala perceives by those who

¹²⁴ Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 73.

¹²⁵ Yamada, Mitsuye in Moraga and Anzaldúa, 69.

¹²⁶ Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.

want to simply extract soundbites of indigenous knowledge, there is also a concern of the inability to relate to, or resonate with, interfaith participants on the level of religion.

While all of the contributors to this project have participated in institutional interfaith at some point, and acknowledge the benefit of increased religious literacy and the opportunity to build relationships with religious others, some have made a conscious decision to no longer engage in these spaces citing frustrations with leadership, an interfaith focus on comfort rather than change, and the desires of interfaith organizers to focus on unity rather than radical inclusion. To be fair, critiques or concerns were not a primary focus in most histories, but were made none-the-less.

Frustrations with Leadership

As a non-religious person, religion, and therefore interfaith is hard for Leslie because they feel “like it’s not keeping up with society.” What they mean is that religion and institutional interfaith efforts do not engage with issues of equality and social justice. As Carole explains, “religious leaders are scrambling” and they are going to have to “make changes.” If not, her prediction is that people will continue to leave religious spaces, not because religious traditions and spirituality is not important but because millennials and GenZ “not willing to deal with discrimination and putting people down.” Olivia shares this critique and adds that “religious leaders need to work in an interfaith way to be better advocates for people who are being oppressed.” To address this criticism we can look to Wuthnow who advocates for religious leaders, those who are on “the front line of American religion,”¹²⁷ to increase their knowledge of religious others. Because their presence in these interfaith spaces not only lends credibility to the

¹²⁷ Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 305.

space, but to the religious others that they are engaging with. Leaders must do more in institutional spaces to argue the need for interfaith. Miriam (Jewish) shares a similar sentiment:

My frustration is in the lack of those more patriarchal systems to engage in interfaith conversations.... I feel that there is a great responsibility of those who consider themselves interfaith leaders to operate in a more circular fashion, where you're engaging more people, not just for optics.... I saw a lot of people showing up at interfaith things and putting arms around their brother. Yet, it never made it to the pulpit.... Why aren't more rabbis and ministers speaking about their interfaith engagement to their congregations?

It might be because the hierarchy of religious leadership won't allow for these conversations. It might be that acknowledging religious others, in these religious institutions causes discomfort. Having observed interfaith over the past 20 years, Ida offers her doubt that religious leaders have the ability to make any real impact. Citing the tie she sees between politics and religion in southern California, she says: "It's different here, it's political here." She continues:

I used to think these official people and meetings were really cool. But I've realized that the official leaders don't have the freedom to say whatever they want. I mean, they are not only representing national but international [interests].... [everything is] very scripted.

It is Ida's experience that religious or political leaders are often invited into interfaith spaces to be the voice of a tradition or offer credibility, which is an observation that supports McCarthy contention that leaders often offer little more than "ceremonial affirmations of pluralism... while also carefully avoiding potential conflicts"¹²⁸ but do little more than that.

Many of the contributors to this project are not considered religious leaders, in that most are not theologically trained and ordained. They are however educated, religious, and civically engaged but only about eleven have authority given to them from a religious tradition.

¹²⁸ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 90.

Contributors to this project are credible leaders in interfaith spaces, but this does not mean that the culture of patriarchy doesn't still impact their confidence. For example, when Helen was included in a meeting of male leaders from Christian and Muslim traditions, she questioned the appropriateness of her attendance because although she is educated, she is not a religious leader and is a woman. Or when Martha (Mormon) slipped through the back door at a Homeless Task Force meeting, she was overwhelmed by a room "filled with religious leaders and clergy of all sorts of faiths." It is why when the presenter asked for volunteers to be mentors to those working their way out of homelessness Martha reticently approached the presenter admitting: "I am not clergy, I am just a citizen, I don't have any religious responsibilities that would qualify me, but I am a mom and I know how to be a woman... I can help." Considering why Martha was the one volunteering and not the religious leaders, Fatima suggests that they are probably "inundated by classes and pastoral counseling" for their own community, and simply do not have the time. This lack of availability extends to attending interfaith or community meetings and events. Offering another perspective, Kala observes that when religious leaders (male or female) do show up, it is most likely because it falls within their job description. Creating a challenge for Native people, who are not compensated in any way for their interfaith participation, and yet interfaith organizers expect native representatives to join without an offer of reciprocity, monetary or otherwise. For those that do show up, Amy observes and critiques: "you meet with each other, and you have an interfaith experience at your board meetings, but I'm not seeing the activism in the community." Which is exactly what Martha observed, a room full of leaders unwilling or unable to support a social need.

Zaha indicts male leaders specifically for being willing to attend a lunchtime meeting once a month, but chafe at the request to do anything more than "smile" and

“take pictures.” Women, on the other hand, who rarely have leadership positions, but are motivated by a desire to “make a difference in society,” are free from institutional limitations of their traditions. Rosalie suggests that “we don’t have to wait for permission,” women just start working together. Echoing Rosalie, Zaha adds:

[We] don't want to wait for leaders to do something. I'm available. Are you available? Let's talk. Why do I need to go to my leader, and you go to your leader? Let's talk and build relationship and understand how you practice your faith and how I practice [mine].... Leaders will have a beautiful conference. They talk. They eat. They agree. And they go home. What's next? We'll see you next year. Yes, Hamdullah, God bless.... So instead of waiting on our leader to do something, I respect my leaders, but I'm gonna do it on my own.... through the years my leaders didn't do anything except [for] meeting and meeting and meeting.... God bless you for all the meetings, [but] we still have problems in the community, because you never engage your congregations.

From Zaha’s perspective institutional interfaith that is organized by religious leaders does little to fulfill the potential good that interfaith can bring to communities. Zaha suggests: “we need new blood. We need to find a way to recruit people and do something different.” The problem, she admits, is that some from her generation “are stubborn” and “want to hold onto the chair,” but even when someone from a younger generation gets a seat at the table, their ideas are often implemented and filtered through the mentality of the ‘old guard’.

When considering interfaith activities that were inspiring to her, Emma reminisced on an experience in West Oakland when a group of young adults “spent the whole day just getting dirty” at a community garden. She appreciated how “thoughtful” the facilitators were. “They started with an easy question like: ‘tell us your traditions around food’... Then they ramped it up to values espoused by our religious traditions, and then they ramped it up to justice.” Emma left “feeling productive” because of the service performed, but also because “we got to integrate and reflect on our traditions and what had actually pulled us together. They bound it to this bigger

idea of what justice looks like.” The day ended with “a challenge to go back to our communities and say: what's next?”

This example highlights Miguel De La Torre’s articulation that, “contrary to stereotypes, millennials and Generation Z are neither self-absorbed nor indifferent to the suffering of the world. These generations, generally speaking, abhor hypocrisy and have a deep grasp of right and wrong.”¹²⁹ As a Gen-Z, what is important to Amyra is that she is actively participating and contributing in a positive way toward those issues that will have a lasting impact on generations to come. For millennial and Gen-Z contributors, the critique of interfaith is an extension of the critique of institutional religion.

At an interfaith meeting in June of 2022 a local interfaith council brought together young adults from a variety of faith traditions to speak about what they feel the importance of religion is in the world today. One panelist spoke to the recognition that there seems to be a disparate focus that pits religion against social justice efforts. As a millennial, Leslie observes “a lot of older folks in interfaith” want to stick to conversations about faith and not other aspects of identity that they feel might get “political.” For the young adults speaking at this gathering, pulling religion and social justice together is necessary. While these young adults do not participate in institutional interfaith spaces, they acknowledged, as do many of the contributors to this project, that interfaith is a unique space in which religion and social justice can be brought together.

Working with interfaith youth for almost 20 years, Sahib finds that they are less judgmental and have a greater willingness to dialogue about hard issues, compared to her own

¹²⁹ De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege, Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*.

generation. To which Ida adds: “They’re so unabashedly unafraid to talk to each other.” Emma notices, especially amongst the humanist students she works with at her university, that they are “politically active,” “critical thinkers,” and most inclined to participate in interfaith work. Similarly, Abigail finds that the students she works with are more willing to confront hot topics, have difficult conversations, to be uncomfortable, and to strive for radical inclusion. She assumes that their parents and older generations are not as willing. For example, during the 2016 presidential election, the students Abigail works with at the interfaith center “wanted to talk about it and hold space.” Admittedly nervous, but pleasantly surprised, Abigail was impressed by that how “civil and respectful” they were, in the face of a “myriad of different [opinions], all across the spectrum.” While only 14 of the contributors to this project are millennials or Gen-Z it seems that they are acknowledged by all contributors for their willingness to be uncomfortable.

Comfort, Conflict, Contention, or Change?

A complaint levied against institutional interfaith in general and religious leaders specifically, is the performance of interfaith in which comfort takes precedence over social change. Barbara Brown Taylor’s assumption is that God “cares more about your transformation than your comfort.”¹³⁰ And yet it is Leila’s observation that leaders want to have “peaceful little lunches” and “peaceful little lectures,” and employ a concerted effort to avoid any conversations or topics that might cause discomfort, therefore “we all ‘fakely’ agree with each other” but no progress is being made. The desire to create peaceful spaces, at the expense of productive spaces is the focus of this critique. Like Leila, Judith points out, that some institutional interfaith efforts operate under a false assumption that if discomforts exist, peace must be absent. Or rather, the

¹³⁰ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 156.

absence of conflict is the manifestation of peace. But what Cragg tell us is that true, lasting peace, must come as the result of hard, difficult, and deep conversations that involve multiple intersecting issues.¹³¹ And, according to Angela Davis, peace is “inextricably connected” to justice.¹³² So, while institutional interfaith efforts have the goal, as Leila explains, of bringing people “together in a peaceful way,” peace “should not be an obstacle to wanting to meet with somebody, where we know initially [there] wouldn't be a peaceful interaction.”

While secularists and liberals assume that religious orientation is the most challenging of identities, and religious difference is the “biggest obstacle to world peace,”¹³³ Leslie who is non-religious, questions the assumption “that people are only divided by faith groups.” For Emma “interfaith work is peace work,” motivated by her humanist philosophy she makes the conscious decision to enter interfaith spaces in which “the talk is tied to action.” Though Esther does not consider herself religious, she is committed to peace and sees religion as an important factor in achieving it. While many contributors, like Zainab see interfaith as a way to break down barriers and “make everyone feel comfortable.” I suggest that most participants experience a lot of discomfort in the process of making others comfortable. One’s willingness to be uncomfortable is determined by their commitment to a type of interfaith that is not just about cooperation and understanding by also inclusion. Obviously there is an aversion to discomfort and dangerous situations that keep us safe, because interfaith should also be safe. But when discomfort maintains separations, divisions, and disconnections, we need to consider what is causing the discomfort.

¹³¹ Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

¹³² Davis, *Women, Culture, and Politics*, 69.

¹³³ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 1.

Based on comments about politics and negative interfaith experiences based on race, sexual orientation, and other social positions, it is clear that religion is not the only dividing line in interfaith spaces. These are what Helen calls “sticky wickets” that “hit emotional buttons” and often get in the way of “clear thinking, open minded, loving responses.” But these “sticky wickets” only get in the way if we let them. Often, in an effort to maintain peace, avoid offense, and keep the dominant (read: white, hetero-sexual, conservative, Christian men) group comfortable, institutional interfaith discussions and efforts steer clear of conversations that make differences more apparent or would offer solace to others in the room. In an effort to avoid perceived divisive conversations about things like racism, sexism, homophobia, immigration, or domestic violence, topics that some label “political,” we unintentionally ostracize those that would benefit from our acknowledgment of the pain and discomfort experienced by the non-Christian, non-white, and non-straight, people in the room. Ultimately, Aisha finds that many interfaith events become redundant, only engaging in topics that will maintain a level of comfort, causing her to question the efficacy of interfaith. Optimistically, Judith believes in an interfaith space where there can be “deep, deep disagreements” and “nothing’s been sorted out or fixed,” but “people to still come together and pray or serve.” This is why Judith appreciates the potential that institutional interfaith spaces offer.

So then, if logic dictates that peace and comfort are not necessarily mutually inclusive, we can also comprehend that peace and conflict are not mutually exclusive. As Olivia describes interfaith, it is a space that raises “light, not heat” and acknowledges differences without contention. Patrick Mason and David Pulsipher argue that while differences pose “real challenges,” engaging them “constructively and in love for the other, such conflict become a

source of endless and life-giving creativity,”¹³⁴ they become generative tensions. Contention on the other hand “is not simply holding different opinions or seeing the world in different ways, but rather engaging that difference in a spirit of anger.”¹³⁵ When “sticky wickets” are responded to with anger, fear, or spite, conflict leads to contention. Contention then is what needs to be guarded against, not conflict.

The two ways in which “sticky wickets” become apparent are through questions and relationships. Therefore, many institutional interfaith efforts avoid hard questions and choose to not engage in certain relationships. First, Taylor has observed that in most institutional interfaith interactions “the easy questions are the ones that get answered. The hard ones – the important ones – are too often deferred.”¹³⁶ Affirming this observation, Leila has discovered that when an interaction is avoided, or a hard question isn’t asked, for fear of discomfort or friction, an opportunity for learning is missed. Leila has become disenchanted with institutional interfaith because of the constructed limits that restrict questions and engagements. In institutional interfaith spaces she was constantly told: “don’t ask those questions.” But Leila did. At one point Leila has a question about polygamy and Mormonism. Recognizing that this might be a difficult question and acknowledging a bit of her own discomfort, she first asked some of the members of her own faith community, assuming that as interfaith veterans they might know the answer. When they did not, Leila asked the practitioners themselves. Those from her own community begged her not to ask, fearing that it would create discomfort, and possibly offense. Nevertheless, Leila asked the question, based on the assumption that they would be more offended if she passed judgement without a conversation, which she considers “an offense in

¹³⁴ Mason and Pulsipher, *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration’s Answer to an Age of Conflict*, 71.

¹³⁵ Mason and Pulsipher, 72.

¹³⁶ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 142.

itself.” The members of *The Faith Club* offer: “Sometimes it’s better to talk about what may be offensive, or what seems to be offensive, or is assumed to be offensive, because in the end people are better off for it.”¹³⁷ This experience highlights the unwillingness of individuals to risk discomfort, ultimately resulting in the maintenance of ignorance.

While Leila still sees the potential value of institutional interfaith efforts, she no longer regularly participates in these spaces, and instead enters political spaces, community spaces, and uses her interfaith ethic to advocate for those disenfranchised communities that would benefit from working together. Often Leila would think: “Damn! How impactful would it be if people from this race and this race, or this faith and this faith worked together? It would be freaking amazing!” But would frequently get “pissed off” when interfaith organizers would refuse and say: “don’t bring these two people together.” Their unwillingness to engage in hard conversations and enter certain relationships was frustrating.

However, Leila as well as Leslie, Johnny, and a few others offer a powerful example that brings her hope. After the Pulse Night Club shooting¹³⁸ in June 2016, a revolutionary event was planned between the local LGBTQ center and a local interfaith council. This tragedy took place right before the holy month of Ramadan and a plan to hold an Iftar was made. Attending this event, Leila was aware of her impact. Wearing hijab, she was no longer seen as Leila, but as a ‘Muslim girl’ that was in a space that Muslims hadn’t been, at least not in a visible way. Acknowledging that there are LGBTQ Muslims that are potentially benefited by this event, it was an opportunity to build a bridge between two communities that are often disconnected for social and theological reasons.

¹³⁷ Idliby, Oliver, and Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, and A Jew - Three Women Search for Understanding*, 257.

¹³⁸ [How Pulse Forged a Lasting Partnership Between Muslims and LGTBs \(advocate.com\)](https://www.advocate.com/news/2016/06/24/how-pulse-forged-a-lasting-partnership-between-muslims-and-lgbt)

While all contributors logically know that misunderstandings, offense, and conflict, are inevitable. Elizabeth suggests that interfaith can “get a lot of good done” if it focuses on the “80% that we have in common.” The subtext then is to avoid the 20% that is “sticky.” This is not necessarily an effort to ignore difference but to avoid discomfort. While it is true that those “sticky” ideas, practices, or beliefs might be uncomfortable in order for interfaith spaces to be a catalyst for social change, those who enter must be brave enough to engage conflict, humble enough to accept that offense is inevitable but not intentional, and creative enough to avoid contention.

Comfort is never guaranteed when curiosity is the motivator. Though it is not impossible to feel comfortable in a space of radical inclusion, it is not a stable feeling. The desire to remain comfortable results in an inability of institutional interfaith programs and events to engage diversity in radically inclusive ways. The comfort that results from excluding anyone that might present discomfort to those who dominate the space. For those who have been made to feel uncomfortable in religious, civic, or interfaith spaces is a limitation of institutional interfaith spaces. At the same time, those religious minorities who engage in institutional interfaith spaces experience discomfort as a result of maintaining the comfort of those in the religious majority. For those who have dominated these spaces, exercising an interfaith ethic should motivate the sacrifice of comfort for the benefit of all those that enter these spaces.

What is more important: Unity or Inclusion?

The final critique I will focus on is that of unity over inclusion. Of course, “unity and universality are appealing slogans,” but as Gross points out “if they do not include diversity and

manyness within the unity”¹³⁹ they ultimately lead to conformity and oppression. Thus, Judith Butler questions: what constitutes “unity”?¹⁴⁰ In *Working Alliances*, Janet Jakobsen asks: “How do internally diverse social movements come to look homogenous? How do diverse social movement come to reinforce the homogeneity of the dominant?”¹⁴¹ One way is emphasizing unity. While unity is a persuasive ideal that leads us to believe that if we simply “identify our underlying sameness, our differences will be resolved.”¹⁴² However, when unity the goal of institutional interfaith will always be limited by the most conservative perspectives in the room, or at the table. If interfaith is the manifestation of religious pluralism, then, following the logic of Bender and Kassen, interfaith spaces have the responsibility to “reify difference and autonomy.”¹⁴³ In 1966 Rabbi Heschel cautioned against the suppression of diversity “for the sake of compromise.”¹⁴⁴ As Amy protests, “if we kowtow to the most theologically conservative voices in the room” agreement is only reached if “we’re agreeing to leave one big group of people out of the conversation.” In order to not compromise, and not leave groups out, contributors offer a few observations and suggestions for institutional interfaith to prioritize inclusion over unity.

The once ‘Christian nation’ is shifting because of the religious diversity that exists in the US. In recognizing the increase of interfaith organizations, Judith calls attention to the Christian “underlayment” of interfaith. As the dominant religion in the US, Protestant Christians have the resources and legitimacy to create interfaith spaces, but it is important to consider the driving force behind the creation of these spaces. Edward Said might argue that by creating these spaces

¹³⁹ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What’s the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 137.

¹⁴⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 20.

¹⁴¹ Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics*, 58.

¹⁴² May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 42.

¹⁴³ Bender and Kassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Heschel, “NO RELIGION IS AN ISLAND (1966),” 6.

in which knowledge of the other can be gained, ultimately “makes their management easy.”¹⁴⁵ So while difference is not totally ignored, often in institutional interfaith spaces, it is only acknowledged in controlled ways.¹⁴⁶ Borrowing from Bhabha, Soja points to diversity as a tool employed by the dominant culture to contain difference.¹⁴⁷ Fatima critiques the desire to “sit down, have a lunch, listen to speakers share why they believe what they believe, [and then] shake hands, but as Gruber also critiques, these institutional interfaith events often only focus on “a comparison of official doctrine of religious traditions” ultimately focusing on “the androcentric history of religious traditions”¹⁴⁸ and leaving out the experiences and interpretations of those on the margins.

The first is to be aware of, and avoid, ‘faith washing.’ Because of the Christian-centric nature of institutional interfaith projects, it seems that while there is an inclusive ideal, the reality is that there are still exclusionary practices.¹⁴⁹ This looks like Muslim identity being “entirely perceived on Christian terms” and Christian traditions serving “as the mold for setting the agenda.”¹⁵⁰ For example, Asma has often received calls asking for an imam to speak at an event. When she questions what they know about the responsibilities of an imam, the response will be something like: “you know like the priest, the head of the mosque.” Asma understands this reference but critiques it as an imposition of a Christian-centric framework on the Muslim community. Asma concedes that “the Muslim community, as an Abrahamic tradition,¹⁵¹ is often able to manipulate itself to fit the mold,” but it is more difficult for non-Abrahamic communities.

¹⁴⁵ Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 36.

¹⁴⁶ Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. “Bhabha describes the liberal “entertainment and encouragement of cultural diversity” as a form of control and “containment.”

¹⁴⁷ Soja.

¹⁴⁸ Gruber, “Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak?,” 52.

¹⁴⁹ Ding Jo

¹⁵⁰ Gruber, “Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak?,” 67.

¹⁵¹ Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Those that trace their origin to the story of Abraham.

A similar observation is made by Sahib, explaining that the challenge for Sikh participation in interfaith is the lack of a central governing body that is comparable to a Christian structure.

However, for both women their interfaith participation allows them awareness of assumptions that create barriers to inclusion to interfaith spaces.

If interfaith makes a constant plea to focus on similarities then when the complex reality of difference is made evident, Judith has observed: “everyone gets really tribal, really fast.”¹⁵² As Helen explains:

Yes, we've been raised different, but we honor those differences... That is what we're lacking in our politics today. I think that may be lacking in academics today, too. I'm not so sure we're not lacking it from the pulpit at times. Sadly, it takes events that none of us want to happen, but suddenly we all run together again, and we stand in vigil.

However, as Jakobsen reminds:

Learning to work with, rather than contain diversity and its accompanying complexity is the task of alliance building, and yet ethical theory and its assumptions as enacted in politics frequently leads away from this work and toward efforts to contain diversity and flatten complexity... As long as diversity is not articulated in and through complexity, moral commitments to respect diversity and efforts to form alliances will remain ineffective.¹⁵³

For these reasons, Martha is concerned that institutional interfaith has “become quite exclusive” and why McCarthy found that “those groups who aim to be most socially efficacious” often have “the narrowest range of faith traditions represented on their boards.”¹⁵⁴ Following this logic, those interfaith groups that have greater diversity are unable to address social concerns that potentially create discomfort. Just as peace is not proof of comfort, unity is not proof of inclusion. But this assumption is what leads institutional interfaith efforts to either focuses so much on unity that no real action is taken or limiting diversity enough to “speak univocally on

¹⁵² Zandra

¹⁵³ Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics*, 5.

¹⁵⁴ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 89.

vital issues.”¹⁵⁵ So, rather than assume that unity needs to be based on similarities, interfaith can borrow from the work of Butler and build solidarity through contradictions. Butler urges us to challenge the idea that unity is a precursor to action and instead “take action with those contradictions intact.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, allow for radical inclusion.

Many contributors critiqued their experiences of institutional interfaith spaces as engaging the ‘same crowd’ or ‘preaching to the choir.’ I argue that this is a manifestation of a liberal superiority that critiques conservative exclusivity, while simultaneously validating progressive efforts of exclusion by holding contempt for those conservative groups that refuse to engage in interfaith. In other words, participating in interfaith does not negate the potential that one will be exclusive. Often interfaith participants justify their contempt of the conservative other, by emphasizing their own commitment to interfaith ideals, while ironically not extending compassion to the conservative other. Here, “compassionate liberalism” as presented by Berlant, helps us to understand the “soft supremacy” that may be “rooted in compassion” but ultimately exoticizes and diminishes the “inconvenient and the noncompliant.”¹⁵⁷ This is also an attempt at what Jakobsen calls “liberal containment” which can be subverted by forming “alliances through and across complex interrelations” pushing back against “reductive pluralism.”¹⁵⁸ It is these relations that are the basis of alliance, not sameness.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, when institutional interfaith spaces that are dominated by more conservative members they often ignore or are oblivious to the offense that they cause to participants that are non-Christian, non-religious, or socially liberal. What this looks like is a narrative controlled by Christians that tell stories of how

¹⁵⁵ McCarthy, 117.

¹⁵⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 6.

¹⁵⁸ Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics*, 10.

¹⁵⁹ Jakobsen, 164.

open and accepting they are of religious others. For example, as a liberal gay Christian, Amy feels like, at least in interfaith spaces, she doesn't "really have a place at this table" because she feels that her "voice has to be silent." In either case the focus on unity in institutional interfaith spaces makes it impossible for some groups to join. This will be discussed further in chapter four.

Ultimately a focus on unity without complexity, or what I am calling radical inclusion, makes interfaith spaces "ineffective in their stated goals."¹⁶⁰ Focusing on interfaith being a place of radical inclusion means that the "crowd" and the "choir" will shift, change, and grow. It means that as religious literacy increases, interfaith spaces expand. The challenge with committing to radical inclusion is that there is an increased likelihood of discomfort and conflict. So, while some contributors critique interfaith for its lack of diversity, there is also the fear of what might transpire if radical inclusion really does diversify the crowd. Fear of discomfort or an unwillingness to open interfaith spaces is the result of a lack of creativity. Therefore, what interfaith has the opportunity to do, more so than any other social space, is to acknowledge and engage "human wholeness," to complicate and blur the boundaries of difference.

As one of the most recent participants in institutional interfaith spaces, Kala's experiences add to the critique offered by Fatima. Noticing an increased desire in recent years for indigenous presence and representation in various spaces, including interfaith spaces, Kala is concerned that these acts are merely tokenistic. Appreciative of the effort, she wonders about the real impact. Specifically, will including and inviting indigenous elders to offer a blessing or land acknowledgement lead attendees to live in reciprocity with nature, to protect the water and our

¹⁶⁰ Jakobsen, 165.

plant and animal relatives, to refrain from attempting to control or change others? If not, then acknowledging the land is disingenuous.

Though Protestant Christians have been praised for their commitment to interfaith work, many in this project critique the control they have over interfaith spaces. Having worked for a number of interfaith organizations, one of which had a board of white Christians, with an advisory board of mostly non-Christians, Betty struggles with the control that white Christians have in interfaith spaces. This may be one reason why, as a Filipina Christian, Olivia feels like the “only one in the room.” Similarly, Emma has observed non-white, non-Christians being invited to join, as long as they do not “complicate or question the structure.” As a humanist with indigenous roots, Emma has experienced interfaith spaces where she is expected to “accept the invitation” and be grateful for the part she is asked to play. With this being said, the unreflective desire for representation often leads to what Asma sees as “faith washing.” First, by forcing participants to engage in interfaith activities in a way that is comfortable for the organizers. Second, by inviting participation without allowing contributions. Or, by only engaging with those communities that one is familiar or comfortable with. Adding to this analysis, Asma suggests that “the majority wants to say that they're being inclusive, so they nominally invite other groups to squeeze into their own programs” as what Vivian May might call a “theatrics of inclusion.”¹⁶¹ De La Torre adds to this critique by reminding us that “attempts to include faces of color without necessarily hearing voices of color” further tokenizes minorities for the “sake of political correctness.”¹⁶² Or an even more nefarious motivation, to control religious minorities.

¹⁶¹ May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 226.

¹⁶² De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege, Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*.

Many are still frustrated by the “role playing” that takes place in institutional interfaith spaces. Often institutional interfaith seems to be meeting a quota, or what Asma critiques as “demonstrative inclusion”. In other words, “an arrested, fixated form of representation” that needs to be ‘seen’ more than engaged. This “arrested” form is an attempt at control. An attempt to make the religious other fit into the imagination of the dominant (read: Christian) other. Confused by the pattern of classifying interfaith events and movements “that sets up discussions around labels and categories and boxes rather than just being people, [who] see one another as noble souls,” Fatima hates that when she enters the room she is seen as “the Muslim.” What she is advocating for is a move of decategorization which “encourages members to deemphasize the original group boundaries and to conceive of themselves as separate individuals rather than as members of different groups.”¹⁶³ However, the nature of interfaith requires a fundamental self-categorization, though religious categories do not have to be the only identity maker. These categorizations should be used to begin the work of appreciating diversity rather than as a reification of difference. Recategorization then creates ingroup identity between those “formerly perceived primarily as outgroup members,”¹⁶⁴ based on social leanings, gender, racial or ethnic identities, sexual orientation, hobbies, and/or life stage. For example, contributors have built relationships with one another based on being parents, social justice interests, art, and food.

While intersectionality could offer and encourage critical wholeness in interfaith spaces, rather than boxed identities, religion is often either tacked on as an afterthought or an ignored identity all together. This may be the result of a secular subconscious of the modern liberal position which has pushed religion out and back in an effort to maintain the belief that equity and

¹⁶³ Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami, “Intergroup Contact: The Past, Present, and the Future,” 11.

¹⁶⁴ Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami, 12.

religion are incompatible. For contributors that are trying to engage intersectionality, like Judith, Betty, Olivia, and Emma, rather than trying to transcend differences, interfaith should preserve differences while also offering a “mechanisms to process them.”¹⁶⁵ This will require participants to see the religious other as more than their religious “marker of difference” which actually “obscures” other markers. When difference is recognized, Bender and Kassen suggest that this constitutes “the truly universal embodiment of human sociability.”¹⁶⁶ Attempting to complicate this obscurity, Fatima often enters interfaith spaces wearing her head scarf and announcing that her favorite band is Metallica. Her intent is to “destroy” any stereotypes that might be held about what a covered Muslim woman can or can’t do or like. Similarly, Aisha self-identifies as “a hijabi that talks about sex. I’m a Muslim who is visibly proud of my faith and will talk about sexuality because it’s something that needs to be discussed.” Bhabha reminds us that:

Stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in a signification of psychic and social relations.¹⁶⁷

The inclusion of religious others also includes intra-faith others. Asma (Sunni Muslim) shared a moment of acknowledged discomfort at an interfaith event. Seated at a table with two Ahmadiyya Muslim women who she did not know but were from the same geographical location, her discomfort became palpable as an “older Pakistani uncle” came to introduce Asma to a Christian attendee. Ignoring these two other women, this uncle brought up an interfaith iftar that Asma’s interfaith council was hosting and prodded Asma to offer an invitation to this Christian man, which she did. After the two men left, Asma recalls being “aware of the giant

¹⁶⁵ Li, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire and the Challenge of Solidarity*, 378.

¹⁶⁶ Bender and Kassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, 23.

¹⁶⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 107.

elephant in the room, that it is easier for me, as a Sunni Muslim, to invite Jews, Christians, Mormons, Buddhists, and even atheists to attend an interfaith iftar, than the Ahmadiyya women sitting to my right.” So, she invited them. Since this experience, the interfaith council that she is a part of has added a board member from the Ahmadiyya community. But even this addition was not as simple as inviting them to join the board. Asma first asked a Muslim friend for council on this decision. The conversation began with Asma acknowledging that “it’s going to come down on me pretty hard that I have invited an Ahmadiyya person.” A foreseeable challenge might occur as the organization plans future events. Having an Ahmadiyya Muslim being part of the planning and participating in the events themselves may “delegitimize” the events in the “eyes of some Sunnis.” The advice Asma received was to acknowledge the potential challenges, and be aware and prepared that some other Muslim participants may walk away from the organization’s interfaith efforts, but she would “have to decide what’s important:” Unity or inclusion?

Intentional and Organic Interfaith

Intentional interfaith spaces are conceptualized as those spaces in which a secular or religious space allows for interfaith encounters to take place. They are different from institutional interfaith spaces, because the space is not curated by an organized interfaith group but a religious or civic group for a specific purpose. Another important difference is that intentional spaces can be seen as an act of what Gayatri Spivak calls strategic essentialism. Unlike institutional interfaith spaces that Fatima criticizes for their essentializing, intentional spaces highlight a religious tradition for the purpose of claiming identity and refuting stereotypes. For example, ‘Open Mosque Day’ events or ‘Fast with A Muslim’ events are not created by an institutional interfaith organization but by a faith community in order to regulate the narrative about their community. These intentional interfaith ventures are taken on by a specific group to

‘intentionally’ engage religious others, without necessarily collaborating with them. For example, many contributors have participated in interfaith Seders and Iftar dinners, some have attended open houses of temples and other houses of worship. Harriet and Yuna mentioned their experiences attending the Shinnyo-en lantern floating¹⁶⁸ event in Hawaii which is used as an opportunity to intentionally invite religious others to engage with the Buddhist community. Rather than having a general interfaith purpose, these events and spaces are created with the specific purpose of making the community at large aware of a specific religious group or bringing specific religious groups together.

As a hospital chaplain, Fatima has intentional interfaith experiences every day. “I get to sit and listen and have the privilege and honor of hearing individual’s spiritual journeys and their hardships and their spiritual struggles and their coping skills, using their rituals and practices which are beautiful and so rich.” Finding connection with religious others, that cannot be manufactured, Fatima is skeptical of the ability of an institutional interfaith luncheon to “recreate that kind of experience, month after month. She knows that institutional interfaith spaces “we stick to our narrative,” but in her day-to-day life, she doesn’t need to “stick” to a narrative, she doesn’t need to participate in, what she calls “superficial interfaith.”

Institutional interfaith efforts often consist of “flashy meetings,” planned photo-ops, and “pious resolutions,” rather than the actual work that builds community. Because of this, Gross argues that these institutional spaces, are “not where the serious interreligious work is going

¹⁶⁸ At the first lantern festival that took place in Honolulu, Hawaii, there were about 5,000 participants. Now, about 20 years later this event is attended by close to 50,000 people from all faith traditions. As Nichelle points out, it requires the compliance and support of government and city officials, and volunteers. It is an example of the way in which a space is transformed by a religious group, but becomes an interfaith space because of those that enter the space.

on.”¹⁶⁹ She contends, as do I, that the real work is happening in kitchens, in cars, on couches, and at coffee shops. Organic interfaith relationships, whether they begin in institutional spaces or formed through everyday encounters, they flourish in holistic ways that expand beyond religious identity. For Leslie, “It’s the weird official business” and the “label” that is difficult to “get behind” but the community that is created in more organic ways is what they are grateful to be a part of.

Like Leslie, Aisha appreciate the “solid” friendships that have been born out of institutional interfaith spaces, but “do we need to identify as Christians and Muslims getting together?” The argument in favor of these formalized spaces is that, in many cases, is that there might not be any other reason for individuals to encounter each other, based on their religious identities, if not for these spaces.

Organic interfaith spaces are created in a multitude of ways. For some the sheer fact that they hold a religious identity makes a secular or religious space that is not their own, an interfaith space. For example, Aisha was invited to a poetry event at a church. She was surprised to discover that the friend who invited her was a devout Christian. She has been in poetry spaces where black Christians remain devoted to their faith and engaged in art. These spaces are refreshing to Aisha as she is able to resonate with them. As a woman who wears a head scarf, Aisha’s faith is on display in any space she enters. She has determined that these organic interfaith spaces actually provide more latitude than institutional spaces because those who are engaged in them to ask hard questions, discuss difficult topics, and confront fears in order to deepen connections and strengthen relationships. They are not limited by a desire to maintain comfort and unity or dictated by leaders, rather than assuming that their questions will offend or

¹⁶⁹ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What’s the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 197.

the topics are too divisive; trust, vulnerability, and reciprocity exist on some level beyond religion that protects the overall relationship.

In *Interfaith Encounters*, McCarthy argues that “interfaith relationships were sustained by encounters outside the formal parameters of the interfaith organization.... one-on-one friendships fostered by pre- and post-meeting conversations and peripheral events.... [while] formal interfaith organization sparks an impulse for deeper connection that the organization itself cannot meet.”¹⁷⁰ Griffith found that among evangelical women “the bonds forged in civic halls, auditoriums, and conference centers... are nurtured and maintained through social and devotional activity that often takes place in the home.”¹⁷¹ This is also true for interfaith experiences and relationships. For example, as the result of the Orange County Human Relations (OCHR) Living Room Dialogue series, created in the aftermath of 9/11, that Both Sahib and Miriam attended this intentional interfaith program. Miriam recalls that often the OCHR living room dialogues that she participated in after 9/11 would turn into “parking lot dialogues” because nobody wanted to leave one another... we fell in love with one another.” Another example, was through Teresa’s religious role as a Shinnyo-en Buddhist priest that she came to institutional interfaith space in Orange County. These spaces eventually brought her one of her dearest friends, Elif (Muslim). Teresa also has a Muslim neighbor, who lives Islam differently than Elif, but because of her interfaith ethic, Teresa acknowledges and appreciates those differences. She also acknowledges that if not for the limited knowledge she has gained about Islam, through institutional interfaith, she would not have made the effort to get to know her Muslim neighbor. Over the past few years, especially after the election of Donald Trump in

¹⁷⁰ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 120.

¹⁷¹ Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, 72.

2016, the United States has been a vulnerable space for non-Christians. Teresa has made a more concerted effort to reach out to her neighbor because “the past four years have been really difficult for her, that she basically secluded herself.” Teresa made the effort, “in a neighborly loving way” to let her know that “someone out there supports you, respects what you do, and honors what you do. And wants to learn about you.” As Teresa strived to engender trust, her neighbor has reciprocated with food and smiles.

Teresa sees value in these formalized spaces as they create a “safe space for people to talk and share” and learn, without discounting all of the challenges previously discussed. These spaces offer the opportunity to counter stereotypes, thwart prejudices, and spark organic relationships. Expressing gratitude for the objective of institutional interfaith spaces, some contributors, like Leila and Fatima, have since made an intentional decision to leave these spaces and primarily engage with religious diversity in more organic ways. This does not mean that the need for institutional interfaith has declined. Aisha, who critiques institutional interfaith, concedes that there will always be a need for a “grounding,” a space in which “people can develop the capabilities to bond” and institutional interfaith offers that.

Though Kala has struggled to enter institutional interfaith spaces, she respects the willingness of participants to learn and build relationships, but also sees the limitations. Her suggestion: have smaller gatherings with those who are open to learning and connecting. This more organic model, that focused on connection between “interested individuals” is more effective, as Wuthnow argues, than trying to coordinate formal agreements at the top levels of religious hierarchies.”¹⁷² Although the goals of institutional, intentional, and organic interfaith are similar, according to Wuthnow, it seems that the “best strategy” for achieving the goals of

¹⁷² Wuthnow, 303.

understanding, cooperation, and inclusion, “is not to pursue it directly, but to identify other needs and interests on which to work, letting understanding and cooperation emerge as by-products of these efforts.”¹⁷³ In other words, finding common ground politically, socially, academically, or artistically is an organic process. This also means that “even the most well-intentioned attempts”¹⁷⁴ of institutional and intentional interfaith cannot replicate the affective impact of organic relationships that are motivated by trust, vulnerability, and reciprocity.

Trust is required to develop “dependable relationships”¹⁷⁵ as well as “effective collective action,”¹⁷⁶ both of which are precarious in institutional interfaith spaces. Vulnerability, which is not “a subjective state,” but “a feature of our shared or interdependent lives,” as Butler argues,¹⁷⁷ makes it not something we *are* but a situation or structure that we are *in*, “in relation to which we are exposed.”¹⁷⁸ Therefore, vulnerability is a key factor in relationship building. We are not vulnerable but allow ourselves to enter vulnerable situations. In vulnerable situations trust motivates reciprocity, and reciprocity strengthens trust. An example: Growing up Sahib learned a lot about Christianity and Judaism, but as the only ‘brown’ kids in her school she doubts that the community learned much, if anything, about Sikhi. When Sahib defined these early experiences as “not true interfaith,” my initial reaction was to correct her and point out, as Aisha and Fatima have, that her very presence in a homogenous space makes it an interfaith space, if not a pluralistic space by Eck and Patel’s definition. By acknowledging the lack of reciprocity, a

¹⁷³ Wuthnow, 303.

¹⁷⁴ Putnam et al., “Using Social Capital to Help Integrate Planning Theory, Research, and Practice,” 174.

¹⁷⁵ Putnam et al., “Using Social Capital to Help Integrate Planning Theory, Research, and Practice.” 165, 143, 147.

¹⁷⁶ Putnam et al. 159

¹⁷⁷ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, 45.

¹⁷⁸ Butler, 45.

willingness to learn about the other, I agree with Sahib, these were not interfaith relationships, organic or otherwise.

Institutional interfaith spaces have reduced the anxiety associated with encountering a religious other, by decreasing the vulnerability of the space and creating superficial trust by creating boundaries around dialogue. Organic relationships, on the other hand, engage parts of identity beyond the religious. For example, Mariah considers her relationships with a coworker as a “pure product of interfaith conversations.” To her knowledge, Mariah’s white catholic male coworker from Iowa had never met a Muslim woman before her, at least he had never recognized that he had. But over the ten years that they have worked together, Mariah is grateful for the “heartfelt conversations” they have had about religion, and the time spent in each other’s homes, and with each other’s families for Christmas and Ramadan. Though he is not “passionate about interfaith” and does not attend institutional events their relationship, Mariah believes, has allowed misconceptions to be corrected, thus fulfilling the goal of understading.

What Aisha has noticed is that “people have learned to engage with one another and embrace each other’s diversity without needing it to be labeled an interfaith event.” In other words, diverse identities, including religion, are engaged with in organic ways. For example, one contributor and I discussed our experiences and perspectives on LGBTQ rights, she called attention to the inclusive way we were speaking and the affirmations that we shared that would not necessarily be socially acceptable in one of our houses of worship, or an institutional interfaith space, but “can only be shared in a car in front of Yogurtland.” Can only be shared because trust and reciprocity exist in this vulnerable situation.

When Asma (Muslim) brought a group of about 70 women together for a prayer service in February of 2017, she shared that she was grateful for the bravery of the Muslim women to

open their Mosque and the bravery of the non-Muslim women that entered. Their bravery allowed them to enter a vulnerable space, and their willingness to trust led to reciprocal relationships. She spoke of the need to take a first step in learning about one another by focusing on similarities, but that the friendships that started that night must become more than ‘skin deep’. After this event Asma met Yael, a Jewish Rabbi. In their first encounter they discovered that they both attended Berkeley at the same time, some 20 years earlier, and both had memories of a demonstration in which Asma, a member of Muslim Student Association (MSA), participated in a mock checkpoint to represent, in Yael’s words “what they called Israeli apartheid and brutality.” Having recently returned from Israel, Yael remembers passing through the demonstration, probably using her Israeli ID. Over the next few years their friendships grew, working on Interfaith projects together, and got to know each other as women and mothers. As faith leaders, they unpacked scripture together, and tried to “to look for the stories between the stories.” In organic interfaith relationships, religion isn’t the sole thread that holds relationships together. Often relationships with religious others are fortified through shared interests in social issues, educational pursuits, life events such as marriage, motherhood, or the deaths of loved ones. Thus, as relationships form, identities become more complex, allowing for more connections, but also more conflicts. For example, eventually Asma felt the need to have a deeper conversation with Yael about Israel and Palestine. Just like two members of *The Faith Club*, Asma and Yael’s relationship was challenged. Asma had to ask herself:

Do I want to be stuck here where I say ‘Yael, I love you, I love all of you, except this part of you that I don't want to see,’ because that's not really love. I wanted to be able to see her. Actually, I'm going to be honest, I think I wanted her to see me as a full human being. The caveat was that I have to be willing to see her as a full human being, how am I going to do that?

SimonMary Aihokhai argues that friendships are characterized by “a deeper realm of understanding and appreciation of each other” and when relationships are deepened, “religious

beliefs are no longer viewed as threats, but as legitimate parts of the relationship.”¹⁷⁹ So, Asma and Yael made a plan to meet for brunch. Asma remembers:

We had never talked about the issue, really we avoided it mutually. So we started talking for the first time. I'm only doing it now because I feel slightly more comfortable that maybe I can do this in a respectful way. So we start talking and very early on, I get the feeling that we're probably going to go in two different directions and I care for her deeply so I don't want to lose the friendship. She says to me (I think she could sense my anxiety) she stops me in the middle and says: “Asma, I want you to know that even though we may very well end up on opposite sides of this conflict, we might end up organizing on opposite sides and feverishly fighting for the opposite side. I want you to know my love and friendship for you are unconditional. They're not conditioned on this.” And I remember that was huge for me. I had never realized that's an anti-semitic trope that loyalty or love for Israel would come above a friendship.

Yael remembers this same experience and shares her perspective:

[Asma] is so earnest and authentic. You know? I don't know if she shared with you that she came to me, over a year ago. In all of our discussions we would never discuss, directly, the Israeli Palestinian conflict. And she had built up in her mind that when we were finally going to discuss it, we were gonna find each other too different, we were going to be too polarized it was going to affect the other aspects of our relationship. We met up for brunch. And I knew that this discussion was coming, because [she'd] been alluding to it and I knew how she felt about it. Before she started talking I wanted to make sure. Number one, I had a feeling she was not going to find me quite as far as she thought because she assumed that all Jews feel the same way about Israel. I wanted to tell her that no matter how we felt about a political act that is not only political it's also deeply embedded in culture and religion and anthropology it's extremely complicated but no matter how we felt about that it wasn't going to alter who she was to me. And she's probably the first person that I felt like I could be that diametrically opposed to and still be in a relationship with. We talked and it turns out that I was right, I wasn't quite as far. I mean, we still have very very different viewpoints but it wasn't quite the ones that she was expecting, but I know that she took from that the idea that the relationship that we've cultivated, it's not surface. She plays an extremely important role in my life, and I'm not gonna lose that by being hard headed.

Asma's friendship with Yael is one that, from the descriptions that both Asma and Yael gave, goes more than skin deep. They understand that in any intimate relationship, and especially

¹⁷⁹ Ahiokhai, “Locating the Place of Interreligious Friendship in Comparative Theology,” 150.

intimate interfaith relationships, there will be “firmly held and mutually contradictory beliefs”¹⁸⁰ if not, the “virtues” of understanding and cooperation are empty. In spite of all their differences, Asma continues: “you know, sometimes you're heart is just drawn to another human being. That's how it was for us... it's electricity.” Both of these women understand interfaith in a similar way as Esther: “Interfaith means that you keep your faith but that it has no bearing on your friendships, whatsoever.” Rather than ignore those challenging points, Elif suggests that you acknowledge them and then ask yourself if this is someone you would “want to continue to socialize with or not... someone you want to be inspired by or not” because once you make the decision to keep that person in your life, you are accepting them just as they are.

¹⁸⁰ Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, 143.

Chapter 2 Interfaith Spaces

This chapter engages the importance of physical place in the creation of interfaith spaces and relationships. While I will eventually spend time on the relationships that transcend space, for now I focus on the physicality required for encounters to take place, whether institutional or organic. Conceptualizing interfaith as physical spaces created by the presence of diverse religious traditions in a single location, as well as relational space that allows for affectual experiences. These physical and relational spaces are created in institutional, intentional, and organic ways. Houses of worship become sites for interfaith meetings, as well as service projects and vigils. Homes allow for organic interfaith conversations to take place, as well as relationships that extend beyond religious affiliations. Utilizing the work of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja as well as Michel Foucault, David Harvey and Doreen Massey I use critical spatial awareness to explore the production of interfaith space, in place. This project works to build an understanding of interfaith that contends with the inevitable discomforts, challenges, and incommensurability that are experienced in these spaces while appreciating that these generative tensions hold potential for the betterment of interfaith communities, and society as a whole.

By utilizing oral histories we can see that “life stories have a geography,”¹⁸¹ and that engagements “take place over space and in a geographically differentiated world,”¹⁸² Focusing on the physicality of space in which relationships are forged, as well as the social spaces that they produce, it is important to take into account the “wide variety of disparate influences swirling over space in the past, present and future” that “concentrate and congeal at a certain

¹⁸¹ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, 14.

¹⁸² Massey, *The Doreen Massey Reader*, 217.

point.”¹⁸³ For this project that space and time is Southern California from 2019-2022.

Considering the physical locations in which interfaith communities are created I also spend time on the spaces of India, the United States, and Israel, as geographical locations that impact relationships in ‘here’.

Space

Building from Lefebvre’s conceptualization of the production of space which consists of perceived, conceived, and lived space. This interdisciplinary project searches for ways in which interfaith spaces are produced, as well as the things – relationships – that produced within them. Space, according to Lefebvre, simultaneously requires labor to be produced and produces labor.¹⁸⁴ Understanding that these spaces exist in what Soja calls a “socio-spatial dialectic” means that “social relations are simultaneously and conflictually space-forming and space-contingent”¹⁸⁵ Therefore I see to identify the labor that produces interfaith spaces as well as the labor that is performed as a result of interfaith. I use Soja’s argument that “the organization, and meaning of [interfaith] space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience,”¹⁸⁶ as the following examples will show.

Utilizing Asma’s experience of creating an interfaith space at her masjid,¹⁸⁷ I explore the production of a space. First, it is important to articulate that “space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning.”¹⁸⁸ The masjid specifically, as a sanctuary, is an absolute space that

¹⁸³ Harvey, *Space as a Keyword*, 274.

¹⁸⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 349.

¹⁸⁵ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, 126.

¹⁸⁶ Soja, 80.

¹⁸⁷ A masjid is a Muslim house of worship, also known as a mosque.

¹⁸⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 154.

“embodies all places.”¹⁸⁹ Masjids in particular orient the body toward a specific place – Mecca – and no matter the physical location of the Masjid, all bodies that are inside are oriented to the same place. It is a space that has no place because once inside, the space can be found in any place – any geographical location. Similarly, a Mormon temple or a Catholic church offers the same orientation and absolute embodiment for attendees. For example, though Francis no longer identifies as Catholic, or even Christian, she enters Catholic sanctuaries when she is in need of “comfort and solitude.” The space is absolute, regardless of the place it is located.

In 2017, after “a mishmash of people” consisting of a rabbi, a Christian and two Muslims traveled with Asma, in her minivan, to attend the Women’s March in LA, she decided that something had to be done to build on the spiritual experience. Reflecting on her feelings that day, Asma shares: “People talk about going to Mecca, as this great spiritual awakening. There was something about that day.” She continued:

This was incredible. It lifted me and gave me hope at a time when things felt really dark and scary and murky. But what I'm worried about is, it's fantastic that we're marching together, but this is still only skin deep. For these sisterhoods, for this ally-ship, or whatever it was to be meaningful we have to go further, we have to build these relationships deeper. So, I suggested: Why don't we get some Jewish women and some Muslim women to pray together. Pray for peace in response to the Trump campaign.

Having participated in interfaith spaces since she was a child, Aisha feels that most institutional events barely “scratch the surface.” Asma, on the other hand, having very little experience with institutional interfaith, prior to 2017, Asma was unaware of the potential for overt limitations of institutional or intentional interfaith when she asked for permission to host a small group of women from various faith traditions at her masjid. The gathering seemed like a harmless community endeavor. Keeping in mind that institutional interfaith spaces are created

¹⁸⁹ Lefebvre, 236.

with the express purpose of doing interfaith work, and houses of worship are built with the express purpose of supporting a specific religious community, there is bound to be tension. By creating a more organic interfaith event, Asma unwittingly shifted the purpose of the Masjid for a period of time. Asma remembers: “when I asked the mosque for permission to do this event they didn't think it was going to be anything significant” and she was allowed to proceed. However, as Asma’s experience illustrates. What was conceived of as a small event became a gathering of about 70 women in the Masjid’s “prayer space.”

About six months after this event Asma wanted to host another event. This next event highlighted what Ann Braude calls ‘gendered power dynamics’ with which women must contend.¹⁹⁰ This time she was told that someone needed to supervise the event. Confused because the ‘someone’ that supervised did not have ecclesiastical authority and was not more educated than her but was simply an “older man.” By virtue of his gender, Asma concluded that he was seen as having “more credibility” than her. The concern expressed by male leadership was that the previous gathering might have “desecrated the space.” Meaning that the sacredness of the space had been violated by non-Muslims engaging in this space in a religious, but not sanctioned, way. Feeling confident that it did not, Asma consulted with a well-respected male Muslim elder. Affirming that there was nothing wrong with the event, he suggested that in the future, Asma should avoid using the prayer space. This suggestion highlights Lefebvre’s point that space is “literally filled with ideology.”¹⁹¹ Understanding that, as with any other sanctuary, there are specific ways to honor them, Asma concedes that all too often, “we are functioning in grey zones” of cultural practice. Therefore, interfaith participants – whether entering an

¹⁹⁰ Braude, *Sisters and Saints: Women and American Religion (Religion in American Life)*, 92.

¹⁹¹ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, 80.

institutional, intentional, or organic space – are required to make concessions and adjustments based on cultural and dogmatic interpretations.

Moving from the physicality of space to the metaphors that are used to spatialize interfaith are ‘common ground,’ bridges, and tables. Often, interfaith participants will be asked: “What is the purpose of interfaith?” And a common response will include some mention of the desire to “find common ground.” This is a physical and metaphysical grounding as individuals come together in a ‘common’ geographical location or find ‘common ground’ in values and morals. In a physical sense, any space can become an interfaith space as long as religious diversity is being engaged. Institutionally and intentionally these spaces are often curated for religious diversity to ender. However, when it comes to organic interfaith space, religiously diverse individuals engage their religious identities in diverse spaces such as PTA meetings, work, the post office, or gym. As many non-Christians contributors indicate, often their very presence transforms a space into an interfaith one.

In general, not much interfaith work takes place on physical bridges, though Amy did join with other religious people on a freeway overpass in the summer of 2017 to raise awareness of immigration injustice. As a metaphor the bridge is often used as a tool to do interfaith work. For example, Zhang sees her faith as a “vehicle,” and interfaith is the bridge that allows her to travel to other spaces. Michel de Certeau draws attention to the bridge’s ability to “weld together” and “oppose insularities” as it “liberates from enclosure and destroys autonomy.”¹⁹² These characteristics can be seen as Miriam and women of other faiths crossed the bridge from The United States to Mexico in 2002. The bridge not only allowed the women to move from one place to another, but to shift their focus from the ‘enclosure’ of being religiously different, to

¹⁹² de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 128.

collectively claiming their ‘American’ identity. Miriam reflects on the powerful yet painful realization that: “We found common ground in Mexico.” Finally, interfaith participants take on the responsibility of standing on the metaphorical bridge and helping to connect their own faith community to others. as Taylor submits that her “Christian duty” is to “find the bridges between my faith and the faiths of other people.”¹⁹³

Finally, interfaith tables – from a meeting table, to a unity table, and even a potluck table – are physical spaces in which dialogue occurs. Often institutional interfaith meetings will take place around a table, which is why Amy explicitly said she doesn’t feel like she has a space at the table and why Zaha critiqued leadership for not opening a space at the table for the next generation. At least one institutional interfaith council uses a table in an interfaith ritual – the “Unity Table.” This physical representation of interfaith allows religiously diverse participants to set down items from their tradition next to one another. The last table, the potluck table, is a metaphor that Patel often uses. While most institutional and intentional interfaith events have food, and many organic interfaith relationships meet around food, the physicality of a ‘potluck’ is rare. However, the metaphor remains. The idea that rather than interfaith being a ‘melting pot’ or a ‘tossed salad,’ each individual brings their food item (their religious tradition, if you will) to the interfaith space (the potluck table) in order to appreciate each ‘dish’ in its entirety.

Having a physical space is important but is distinguished from socially produced space as well as mental space.¹⁹⁴ In other words, interfaith spaces are simultaneously physical, mental, and social. The physical locations in which encounters take place as well as the mental space that

¹⁹³ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 25.

¹⁹⁴ Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, 120.

an individual gives to the encounter, which is created as an interfaith ethic is cultivated, gives way to the production of a social space, a space that is transformed because of the encounter.

Space is required for religiously diverse engagements to take place. Recognizing that interfaith encounters require both physical and mental space, I turn to those locations that become interfaith spaces – civic and religious locations, as well as homes and private places. As each geographical place is perceived, the space becomes bounded. That is, boundaries are created in place in order to define the space. These boundaries which become ideologically impenetrable are, in reality, as Ajun Appadurai indicates, quite “fragile social achievements.”¹⁹⁵ They become even more fragile once we acknowledge that “the world has no divinely or dogmatically sanctioned spaces,”¹⁹⁶ but all spaces are socially constructed, and therefore can be deconstructed. As Appadurai points out, “boundaries” require “special ritual maintenance,”¹⁹⁷ which includes the creation of difference and the maintenance of divisions. As Massey argues: “space is not simply an aggregation of territories.... Each place is a node of relations, and internal complexity.”¹⁹⁸ Therefore, the creation of interfaith space offers an opportunity to address the inevitable challenges of diverse religions, practiced by diverse people, entering diverse spaces in productive ways.

Interfaith takes place in physical locations, occupied territories, as well as on metaphysical ‘common ground.’ Southern California is a physical location that all contributors have in common, though at the time of the interviews five contributors did not live in Southern California. Rachel (Jewish), who geographically situates her story as beginning in western

¹⁹⁵ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 403.

¹⁹⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 311.

¹⁹⁷ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 179.

¹⁹⁸ Massey, *The Doreen Massey Reader*, 325.

Massachusetts as a Jewish minority, found grounding as a Jewish person in Israel, as well as a connection to America, and currently engages in interfaith work in Southern California. She says: “There is nowhere I would rather be right now than in Los Angeles as part of the interfaith community... We’re living in the heart of what’s being attacked, we’re in the heart of multiracial, pluralistic democracy. We’re making it happen. We’re working on things together. There’s no other place I’d rather be right now.” Doing interfaith work in LA, Emma recognizes space as being imperative to the work. Having connections to Arizona, Guam, Japan, and Los Angeles, space tells Emma something about religion. Emma explains that LA offers access to “very niche religious groups,” beyond the “big five.”¹⁹⁹ It is the space that allows the religion to be encountered.

Physical space is dominated by social practice. As a Muslim, Asma provides an exacting critique of the ways in which non-Christians are forced to navigate Christian-centric spaces. For example, Deborah points out, finding a physical location to hold institutional interfaith meets and events “is a big deal.” As a Jew, many places feel “Christ-centric” and consequently, haven’t always felt ‘common’. While many contributors express the goal of finding ‘common ground’ as an idiom for theological commonalities. I contend that having physical space in common is only the beginning. Therefore, depending on the purpose of an institutional interfaith event, certain spaces may be avoided in order to prevent alienating certain groups, or to restrain the dominance of one group over others. Often city or government buildings are chosen for their supposed neutrality but can still be complicated locations based on context. For example, a civic space can be utilized for an interfaith event or meeting, however there may still be lingering Christian imagery or language.

¹⁹⁹ Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism

Common ground is less of a concern for intentional or organic interfaith spaces. For example, a house of worship or a home can become an interfaith space when it is opened to friends of various faith and non-faith traditions, but the space does not relinquish the religion of the host. Because these spaces are not common, guests alter their appearance and behavior (remove their shoes or cover their head) in order to enter the space. In each of these examples the space is shared because there are multiple identities convening in the same location. Therefore, anyone entering a Muslim prayer space will remove their shoes and any person entering a gurdwara will cover their head. Every interfaith exchange, every space that is altered to allow for learning, Judith believes that the cells inside of us change as well. The space itself requires us to change even as we change the space. For example, Martha, Mary, and Elizabeth all offered examples of Muslim, Jewish, and other Christian communities using a Mormon churches/building for a period of time, whether for events like a Ramadan Iftar or funeral service, or for an extended period of time for weekly shabbat services.

These examples illustrate that in some cases the space dictates the engagement. When an Orange County Jewish community used a Mormon church building for Shabbat services, their cultural practices were limited by what was appropriate and respectful for the religious tradition that ultimately controls the space. At the end of the day the Jewish congregation was a guest, and the Mormon hosts determined what could and could not be done. However, from what Elizabeth remembers, the only real constraint was that at the Shabbat meal, wine, coffee, and tea was not allowed to be served. Martha supposes that religious others “love using our buildings because we don’ t have crosses everywhere” making them spaces that easily transform. To this day she thinks, “Nobody is going to believe that I went to a Mormon building, with a female Rabbi leading the service accompanied by a reggae band.” But she did, proving that while people have

to change to enter interfaith spaces, the people also change those spaces. As for the hosts, the Stake President,²⁰⁰ who is the religious leader for the region, directed any members of the Church that attended the service or helped open the space to be respectful and, if warranted, to wear a yamaka (or Kippah). Elizabeth and her husband were able to attend many services and she is impressed by the willingness of The Church leadership to open up the space in such an unrestricted way.

On the other hand, in reflecting on a women's interfaith Seder that Yael hosted at her synagogue, she recognized her oversight in not preparing a space for Muslim participants to pray. What seemed to cause her distress, is not that the space needed to change in order to accommodate an interfaith presence, but that those entering the space – a Jewish Synagogue – seemed to feel “like they were encroaching.” What Yael gained from this experience was an understanding of the importance of space and our ability to shift that space. The willingness to adjust “ourselves” and our spaces in order for others “to be able to express themselves;” and that their religious responsibilities are able to be fulfilled.

Creating space is more than just preparing a physical location, it is curating the people and topics that will be encountered in that space. When Yael plans her Women's Interfaith Seder she is “selective about who we invite” in order to prevent proselytization as well as to ensure the space is safe for all who enter. While she has never had an issue with Jewish participants feeling like Christian participants were evangelizing, it is still a concern. Similarly, she makes a strategic choice not to “invite someone who's going to make derogatory comments about Muslims.” This intentional selectivity means that the space is protected, but it also means that radical inclusion is

²⁰⁰ Regional area religious leader

stifled, supporting the critique that institutional and intentional interfaith programs often ‘preach to the choir’.

Interfaith as Heterotopia

Interfaith as a physically real location is far from utopic. As utopias are “fundamentally unreal,” heterotopias are very real but also very disturbing or contradictory in some way. Following the principles presented by Foucault, I consider interfaith spaces as constituting a type of heterotopia that consist of deviation, ‘crisis,’ juxtaposition, deviation, and time. In determining that interfaith spaces can be created in any place, and are often found in places that are explicitly utilize for something other than religiously diverse engagements, they can be unsettling. For example, whether a house of worship that is specifically built for one religious tradition that becomes an interfaith space, even for a short time, in which multiple religions can be found; or a public space, that was not intended for use by religion at all. What makes these disturbing heterotopias is the fact that much of society has normalized not only a separation of church and state but a separation of religions as well. When one space holds multiple religions, and the result is not conflict, our sense of normalcy is affronted.

As a heterotopia of crisis, interfaith spaces may be entered with apprehension, and the space itself might cause stress, specifically for those who hold fundamentalist beliefs. On the other hand, as will be discussed in chapter five, there are those who enter interfaith spaces bringing with them religious trauma. In these circumstances, interfaith can be a space in which crisis can be addressed, and becomes a reparative space. However, interfaith is not a space of ‘faith-crisis’ per se. Those entering interfaith spaces are firm in their convictions, religious or otherwise. Those who are in the interfaith community, Zhang observes, “are beautiful people,

deeply engaged and devoted to their own faith.” It is those who are not engaged in interfaith that are more likely to perceive the existence of interfaith as a crisis.

By design, interfaith is a space fueled by paradox. These spaces juxtapose “in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”.²⁰¹ Therefore, interfaith spaces encourage religious others to engaged with each other not as classmates, coworkers, or volunteers *with* a religious identity, but religious individuals that also go to school, work, and volunteer. Unlike work or school where individuals have diverse religious identities but are not given space to engage them, interfaith space put religious identity at the forefront. The unity table is a tangible example of this. Another example are interfaith centers that are created in a way that allow for any tradition to inhabit the space for a period of time, transforming the space based on the tradition and needs of attendees. By building a space rather than converting a church ensures that the space is “malleable to any worldview.” Therefore, in one interfaith space a Protestant prayer service can be held one day, a Catholic mass the next, Jummah prayer on Friday, followed by Shabbat, the space is determined by time. There is a “small little nook” at the interfaith center that Abigail is particularly fond of. It was a “waste of space” until it was designated as a prayer and meditation room, students began using it. Abigail was giddy as she described the cushions for meditation and the wudu station that was built to allow Muslim students to prepare for prayer. Since making these changes “the use of the space has dramatically increased.” This is an example of the juxtaposition as well as an example of the need for space to be designated in order for it to be used.

²⁰¹ Foucault 25

Conceptualizing interfaith as a heterotopic site that “is not freely accessible,”²⁰² or assumed to be inaccessible. Though many interfaith spaces are created with the motivation of inclusion, there is an observable lack of secular and atheist participation, as well as pagan and evangelical representation. Whether that is because interfaith is not appealing, or feels unwelcoming, it seems as though it is inaccessible or undesirable space for some. This will be discussed further in chapter four.

Time may be a factor in making interfaith inaccessible. Religion determines if one follows a Gregorian or lunar calendar, and what days and times are designated as sacred. In creating interfaith spaces, awareness of time, in all its forms and classifications is significant. Building on the work of Massey and Harvey, space cannot be discussed without time. On a practical level, spaces themselves are subject to the time at which someone enters them. If a space is only open at certain times of the day, that space can only be transformed or encountered when it is open to the public. This is one of the reasons why the interfaith center that Abigail works at is explicitly open every day for students to engage with the space in whatever ways they need, regardless of the events taking place. Other spaces only become interfaith spaces at certain times, because those are the times in which institutional or intentional interfaith efforts are made to transform them. For example, a city building is reserved once a month for a two-hour interfaith meeting. Time must be considered in the planning of interfaith events because time limits who can and will engage. Will the event conflict with any religious holidays? For example, will an event in the fall conflict with Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana? When will Ramadan be this year? Will a specific day of the week or time intentionally exclude a religious community based on their ritual patterns? Given the topic and purpose of a specific event will

²⁰² Foucault 26

Jews attend on a Saturday (Shabbat)? Will Christians attend on a Sunday (Sabbath)? In the aftermath of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic another layer of space and time has to be considered. Should the event be held outside? Will social distancing be possible? Can this event be successful over Zoom? For one interfaith program, covid opened up an entirely new avenue for dialogue.

For about five years before the pandemic Zhang had been holding “Spiritual Dialogues” in her home, once a month, typically on a Saturday morning. As a personal endeavor, the benefit of this project was that it was not limited by institutional hierarchies, allowing her to bring up topics of interest regardless of potential discomfort. Her purpose was to create a space where “people can dialogue and try to think from different angles of spirituality... to have exchanges” and for all who participate to “strengthen their own spirituality” without the limitation or domination of institutional religious traditions or the approval of an institutional interfaith council. Because of the pandemic she began to hold the program online, through Zoom. Having connections with students in China she found that if she held the event at 4:30pm PST it would be about 8:30am in China. This change in time, and virtual location, opened up an opportunity for more people to participate in an interfaith experience.

As this project also highlights, interfaith is “linked to slices in time”²⁰³ and interfaith spaces are more likely to be created in moments when religion is being threatened or religion is a threat. Spaces are not dormant until an “absolute break” but are transformed into a heterotopia at the moment a response is needed, pointing to the fact that while religion is focused on the eternal, interfaith is clearly focused on the temporal.²⁰⁴ Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and

²⁰³ Foucault 26

²⁰⁴ Foucault 26

subsequent hate crimes against people and communities of faith, interfaith spaces are created in response to temporal acts and are maintained in the here-and-now for temporal purposes.

Foucault conceived of heterotopias as either illusions of, or compensations²⁰⁵ for, ‘real’ space. On the one hand interfaith can be the space in which the illusion of peace is produced by participants focusing on those things they have in common and ignoring anything that makes them uncomfortable. On the other hand, those interfaith spaces that engage in dialogue about the hard and real struggles within and because of religion. Interfaith heterotopias offer an opportunity to engage not only with diverse traditions, but also allows us to reflect on the challenges of our own traditions. Thus, interfaith spaces allow for otherwise possibilities, an otherwise orientation to religion that neither idealizes nor condemns religious institutions and affiliations.

Interfaith as a Thirdspace

A thirdspace is not a plural space, but is a radically inclusive space, in which “a certain pluralism persists.”²⁰⁶ It is not a universalizing space, but a space that refuses binaries. For Bhabha third space (two-words) is focused on identity, not geography. It is a process of ambivalence. In the context of religion, these ‘hybrid’ identities are what Duane Bidwell calls spiritually fluid. Interfaith as a thirdspace (one-word) is a space of “radical subjectivity can be activated and practiced in conjunction with the radical subjectivities of others.”²⁰⁷ For Adela Licona, third spaces are “spatialized though not necessarily geographic context where two or

²⁰⁵ Foucault 27

²⁰⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 292, 379.

²⁰⁷ Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 99.

more things come together.”²⁰⁸ And for Gloria Anzaldua, it is the space in which “antithetical elements mix.”²⁰⁹ But thirdspace, as presented by Soja, is geographically focused, and conceptualized as physical. Defining interfaith as a space that feels like a “place of radical acceptance,” Judith believes interfaith should be a space of “welcoming and belonging;” an ideology that determines space, which Soja defines as:

Everything comes together in thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history.²¹⁰

Interfaith as thirdspace epitomizes this ‘coming together.’ As an in-between space that brings together church and state, the religious and secular, and the private and public. It is a space in which religion is acknowledged without threatening state commitments to religious freedom. Therefore, if church and state are conceptualized as separate spaces, there will be tension, or at worst, contention when a religious person enters political space, or political discourse enters religious space. Interfaith is a space where this tension can be held productively. A space that is creative rather than oppressive.

When thinking of separation, walls or borders come to mind. Licona reminds us that colonial projects of boundary creation impose borders in order to limit and divide. Arguing that the “production of borders rather than on their potential productivity,”²¹¹ Licona critiques the focus place on the border builder, rather than those who live on the border, those who are ambivalent to the border, and cross the border. For example, institutional religions are border

²⁰⁸ Licona, “Third Space Site, Subjectivities and Discourses: Reimagining the Representation Potentials of (b)Orderlands’ Rhetorics,” 4.

²⁰⁹ Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 6.

²¹⁰ Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 56.

²¹¹ Licona, “Third Space Site, Subjectivities and Discourses: Reimagining the Representation Potentials of (b)Orderlands’ Rhetorics,” 5.

builders and interfaith provides an opportunity, a bridge, to cross those borders. Interfaith then, as a thirdspace, is a threat to that boarder, not because it destroys it, but because it becomes livable. While third space is a “lived condition of crossing borders”²¹² Thirdspace is the space of the boarder. An example of third space might be experienced by sitting in one’s own house of worship, envisioning what a religious other might feel, see, and hear in the same space. It is being in the space of a religious other, acknowledging discomfort, unease, and ignorance while remaining curious and brave. It is religious minorities (read: non-Christians) using “whatever means available to them” to navigate the boundaries set by the dominant tradition (read: Christian). On the other hand, Renato Rosaldo helps us understand the physicality of thirdspace as follows:

Our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds. Social boarders frequently become salient around such lines as sexual orientation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, dress, food, or taste... borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation.²¹³

The physicality of thirdspace allows for radical inclusion and radical openness, it allows for those on the margins to enter and decenter those that have controlled other spaces. The marginality of thirdspace, like the margins of a book, are open to additional markings and connections. These margins serve the purpose of separation, but for those who are creative enough, they serve as a space of connections made visible. Though Soja views thirdspace as “a strategic location” for those who are “oppressively peripheralized”²¹⁴ to find community, he leaves religious identity off the list. Interfaith is not only a space of radical inclusion, but also a space of reorientation. In other words, if firstspace are those knowable spaces – homes, houses of

²¹² Licona, 11.

²¹³ Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, 207.

²¹⁴ Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 106.

worship, civic centers – and secondspace is the ‘representation discourses’ of the first space, then thirdspace is the potential emancipation of the space. Further marginalizing religious women who “from so many different communities” are “inhabiting more than one world, seeing from multiple perspectives, embodying ongoing contradictions in relation to their communities.”²¹⁵ And though Bednarowski does not use thirdspace or interfaith explicitly, she acknowledges that women “express the feeling of being in two or three contradictory places at once.”²¹⁶ Exploring interfaith as a thirdspace utilizes the work of Bednarowski to correct Soja’s oversight of not including religion.

Home

Homes, as with any space is transformed by those who enter, and how they enter. Homes are a “traditional site of women’s labor,” a “holy place of intimacy and prayer.”²¹⁷ These women and non-binary folks have done the labor of bring religion into their homes and bringing the religious other into their homes as well. At least eleven participants spoke of the books and objects in their homes that are associated with religious traditions other than their own. My home, for example has been transformed by my religious life, as well as my interfaith relationships. My home houses scripture and religious books, pictures and religious objects, intimate relationships, deep connections, rituals, and prayers. In my home are two paintings of Buddha, one of a whirling dervish, along with multiple paintings for Christ. There is a strand of Islamic prayer beads, the book *It’s Ramadan Curious George* that I bought to read to my children, when I decided to fast with my Muslim friends and wanted my children to understand why mommy wasn’t eating with them. Tucked away in my holiday decorations is a menorah and

²¹⁵ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 32.

²¹⁶ Bednarowski, 29.

²¹⁷ Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, 73.

a book about Easter in Ramallah. My orientation toward these objects determines what I do with them, which is honor the relationships they represent.²¹⁸ For those that participate in interfaith work, they are orientated towards their ‘home tradition’ while also allowing for otherwise possibilities that are created by religious others that enter the space.

The home, like the sanctuary, is an absolute space – “a special, still sacred, quasi-religious”²¹⁹ space and as such a space of possible interfaith encounter. Home is a physical space that serves the particular functions of protection for those that dwell therein and reproduction for society at large. Home is also, according to Valarie Kaur and Anzaldua, a “field of being.”²²⁰ Institutional interfaith spaces on the other hand are not homes; they are outings, entertainment, and educational events, but most are not intimate. In fact, many criticize institutional interfaith events for being manufactured and choreographed depictions of religion, with a few token moments of designed diversity – just enough to be considered interfaith, not too much as to be discomforting.

Home becomes a place that is no longer just physical location or spiritual space but embodied. Interfaith becomes a method of coming home. As Ahmed brings our focus to orientation, she asks us to consider not only how we “find our way” but how we come to “feel at home.”²²¹ Anzaldua provides an example of her orientation to culture, that can be extended to religion, as a cultural phenomenon.

I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture... To separate from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough on the inside to live life on my own. Yet in leaving home I did not

²¹⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 58.

²¹⁹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 121.

²²⁰ Kaur, Valarie, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, 127.

²²¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 7.

lose touch with my origins because *lo Mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry “home” on my back.²²²

How did she come to “feel at home?” She became her home. Thus we can see that “healing begins with self-determination.”²²³ Echoing the work of bell hooks and Anzaldua, Chung reflects: “I feel I have come home because I am at home with myself.”²²⁴ So then, if home is the space we come to at the end of a long day, let your hair down, take your shoes and scarf off, slouch on a couch, share a meal, ask hard questions, and feel safe; if our homes are where we teach our children, have deep conversations with intimate others, build relationships through mourning and celebration; then a home, and a ‘home tradition’ provides a foundation. A way to orient towards the world. But, not all homes are safe, comfortable, or beneficial.

A home tradition might not be our current tradition, but it is a space that is not easily forgotten. Emma, Teresa, Abigail, and Francis, like hooks, had moments when they felt like they couldn’t go home – to their traditions or their families – but eventually returning to visit becomes a “rite of passage” that reassures belonging. Even though these women were raised in a religion they no longer dwell²²⁵ in, their sense of home remains.²²⁶ Ahmed encourages us to not only ask “how we “find our way” home, but how we come to “feel at home”?”²²⁷ We feel at home in multiple spaces,²²⁸ and at times being in an interfaith space with religious others is a shared experience of leaving home.

²²² Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 43.

²²³ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 47.

²²⁴ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*.

²²⁵ Clifford, “Traveling Cultures.”

²²⁶ Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

²²⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 7.

²²⁸ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 42.

For Johnny, like Hooks and Anzaldua, home can be “the site and origin of deep dysfunction” that harms spirits and feels dangerous.²²⁹ For these reasons, Johnny broke away from religion and from her evangelical Christian family after coming out as queer. Reflecting on how hard it was to be in an interfaith space because of its association with religion which was “used so much as a punishment.” Noting a contrast between feeling unsafe at home, Johnny holds the ideal of a safe interfaith space. Much like Johnny, when hooks left home, she “hoped to leave behind the pain.” While hooks attributes her ability to ‘return home’ to doing the “work of wholeness” that allowed her to love and understanding herself and her community, the work of wholeness does not always result in a return. For Johnny, wholeness is a home in which religion is on the table. “Leslie and I talk about religion all the time at home, which is weird because neither of us practice religion... we have our own understanding of religion and now having friends who are still very much religious, it’s great, it feels like a very healthy place to be.”

Ahmed helps to explain that “orientations are about how we begin; how we proceed from “here,” which affects how what is “there” appears, how it presents itself. In other words, we encounter “things” as coming from different sides, as well as having different sides.”²³⁰ For example, Martha remembers her home growing up being a place that was “sacred and protected” from the “mad and confused” world around her. Home can also be spaces in which we *feel* at home because the people, practices, and surroundings are comfortable. A religious home, or a ‘home tradition’ are those doctrines, beliefs, interpretations, practices, and experiences that one is coming from as they enter interfaith or public spaces.

²²⁹ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 18.

²³⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 8.

This space that I create is one in which my identity is formed and forged. It is not the only space. I am able to come from a tradition, enter the world, encounter interfaith spaces, then return to this home space newly formed and ready to deconstruct, reconstruct and modify the home space. Much like Massey's argument that status and career are not left at the office, religion, faith, spirituality or worldview are not left in the home.²³¹ Thus Massey argues that a place is not made in the image of those that attend to it; but, by the identities of individuals and social groups who co-constructed the space.²³² Following this logic, my 'home tradition' as well as my home that has been influenced by interfaith co-exist in the same space and time, they are created by me and are also creating me.

Ahmed speaks of 'sticky objects' those things, experiences, that have been 'picked up' to "show where it has traveled and with what it has come into contact with." In other words, Ahmed clarifies, "you bring your past encounters with you when you arrive. In this sense an arrival has not simply happened; an arrival points toward a future that might or "perhaps" will happen."²³³ The home is relational because, as Massey points out, it is not the objects alone but my relation to them that "occur in space and time," these objects actually "define space and time".²³⁴

A home tradition allows for a place of departure and a space of return. Harriet (Protestant) was able to participate in the intentional interfaith lantern floating event in Hawaii which helped her orient and re-orient toward her home in a new way. She reflects: "We were in the Pacific, halfway between my current home [in Southern California] and my ancestral home

²³¹ Massey, "Reflections on Gender and Geography," in *The Doreen Massey Reader*, 248.

²³² Massey, "Reflections on Gender and Geography," in *The Doreen Massey Reader*, 250.

²³³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 40.

²³⁴ Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," in *The Doreen Massey Reader*, 273.

of Taiwan, with all these Japanese Buddhists... And I felt in touch with a lot of different parts of me. I never knew about Buddhism growing up because my parents sheltered me, but something in me connected” and she was able to have an affective experience.

However, another observer might see this space as relatively sacrilegious, or blasphemous,²³⁵ and might take the images and practices as disorienting and uncomfortable. Bhabha speaks of the “blasphemy of social transformation”²³⁶ which is a “transgressive act of cultural translation”²³⁷ and an act of “living on borderlines.”²³⁸ The blasphemy of interfaith is not that there is a sincere desire to connect with the divine, but that appropriation or fetishism are present. For interfaith participants, it is important that when they bring religious objects or practices into their home that they are incorporated with generosity and permission, into a practice that increases religious possibilities. As we interact with religion and practice religion in our everyday lives, interfaith encounters ‘stick’ to us and we are changed, the spaces we imagine and create are changed, our homes are changed. But this expansion is not without consequence. For those that are religious, interfaith may develop an increased capacity to live religion might restrict the relationships and opportunities in the religious spaces of one’s home tradition.²³⁹ These new orientations may also make the home tradition no longer ‘feel’ like home, remember we don’t have to “leave home for things to be disoriented or reoriented.”²⁴⁰ In fact, we can “feel

²³⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 323. “blasphemy is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject-matter or the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of translation. Into the asserted authenticity or continuity of tradition, ‘secular’ blasphemy releases a temporality that reveals the contingencies, even the incommensurabilities, involved in the process of social transformation.”

²³⁶ Bhabha, 323.

²³⁷ Bhabha, 323.

²³⁸ Bhabha, 324.

²³⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 60.

²⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 9.

discomfort and alienation in a space that is still overflowing with memories”.²⁴¹ In other cases, home traditions have become even more comfortable with the addition of interfaith objects.

Geography of Interfaith

As Appadurai argues, “few persons in the world today do not have a friend, relative, or coworker who is not on the road to somewhere else or already coming back home.”²⁴² So, while southern California is the land on which interfaith engagements take place, it is important to note that many of the participants that engage with one another here, are connected to other geographies. I now analyze the ways in which physical space determines how interfaith relationships are formed as well as how interfaith relationships transform space. Three general locations were mentioned by a majority of contributors. India, because ten contributors spoke of their familial connections or travels to this space; the United States, as the location that all contributors currently reside; and Israel, as a location of interfaith tension and hope. I will spend some time on each place as they offer examples of organic and institutional interfaith efforts.

All the religions of the world live in India – Kunti

We love God better [in India] – Amma

In *Amma’s Healing Room*, Joyce Fluekiger presents a space in which Hindus and Muslims co-exist for periods of time as patients, highlighting the reality that place determines salience of identity. In other words, in this space where individuals do not dwell, but encounter one another, their common need for healing is more important than their religious identity. However, “when they go home” and participate in the rest of life “it matters very much whether

²⁴¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 11.

²⁴² Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 4.

or not they are Muslim or Hindu”²⁴³ confirming the spatiality of religion. Interfaith too, is spatial, as Asma provides greater understanding of the delineation of interfaith efforts as determined by space.

Asma describes interfaith in India as an unbounded space. Whether this is real or ideal, is beside the point, when considering affect. Asma says: “I’ve had friends from India tell me that they didn’t have interfaith programs because they live it every single day.” She offers her grandmothers experience of growing up in a town in India that had Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. Her grandmother told her that every morning an invocation would be offered, rotating between the three communities. In addition, holidays were celebrated together, neighbors were invited into each other’s homes, and they ate each other’s food. “They were immersed in it every single day... they were embracing one another every day.” While this sounds lovely, it is important to recognize that India is not an interfaith utopia, Hindu/Muslim/Sikh divides run deep. For example, Saniya’s mother who was born and raised in India as part of a conservative minority Muslim sect has a different experiences, that has made her more hesitant to enter interfaith spaces. As an immigrant, she was concerned when her children began to participate in institutional interfaith programs in the United States, afraid that they would be persecuted, lose their faith, or convert to another.

When Kunti’s father immigrated to the United States, he built three “very inclusive” Hindu temples, that welcomed “everyone regardless of race, religion, or faith.” His willingness to engage with Hindu communities that come from different geographical regions and practice differently, extends to a willingness to engage with Muslims and Sikhs, and provide an example for Kunti as she engages in institutional and organic interfaith work as a Chaplain in the United

²⁴³ Fluekiger, *Amma’s Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India*, 15.

States. The inclusive interfaith example that she received from her father, however, did not prepare her for the “Hindu/Muslim hatred and bullshit that runs rampant in the United States.” But, the United States is the place where she was able to become friends with chaplains from other faiths, including Islam, and begin to address the challenges that exist through lunch conversations and collaborating on interfaith programs.

Asma describes interfaith in the United States as more institutional and less organic, compared to India.

Interfaith engagement means I live in my religious silo 29 days a month. And then one day out of the month, or every now and then, I'm going to go [to an interfaith event]. It's like saying: “let's go try out Mexican food today.” It's not meaningful. You're not letting other people's traditions touch your heart and inform your sense of what humanity is. You're still seeing humanity through your own lens. And in fact, when you're looking at other traditions you're looking at them from that perspective so you never fully appreciate those perspectives. That's the spot I'm in now, and I want to move past that.

Asma is describing translation, and critiquing the ethnocentric motivations of interfaith. motivations The concept of home extends beyond one's living space. In *Belonging*, bell hooks extends the concept of home to her “home state of Kentucky” and a majority of contributors to this project speak of the United States as their home. However, as Ahmed points out, “sometimes we do not feel at home; you might feel discomfort and alienation in a space that is still overflowing with memories.”²⁴⁴ Thus, in the Bush era of the early 90s Rachel “ran away” from ‘home.’ She moved from the United States to Israel, not realizing that what she was running away from, the problematic politics, existed in Israel too. While in Israel in 1992 the Rodney King riots broke out and she remembers walking into a friend's home to see “Los Angeles burning” on TV. Rachel was struck by what she was seeing and started to cry. Then the woman

²⁴⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 11.

who she was visiting walked in with a laundry basket on her hip, saw the same images on the TV, and said “they can all kill each other for all I care.” In that moment Rachel realized that she did care and made the decision to come ‘home’.

Some Muslims would love to visit Jerusalem, but feel it is unsafe to do so: “I want to go because there are a lot of great people, Jews and Muslims and Christians and I’m interested in people. But you can’t say that out loud.” Others have visited and have seen it as a place where “people seemed to be praying together and there was peace”. And others observe that peace is the result of everyone having their own space. Some contributors fervently believe that “no one has ownership over it... we’re all part of it.” And yet it is a “hard sell” because of “politics and all the things that are man-made... This is an issue that will never be solved.”

“The holy land [Israel] has historically been a battlefield of three world religions.”²⁴⁵

This section is not meant to offer solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, neither is it meant to be representative of the thoughts, opinions, or perspectives of those who are involved in various efforts to address the conflict. Similar to Asma, I do not have a personal connection to the land, but I do have a stake in what Israel and Palestine represent in interfaith spaces. Therefore, I also wish to push against the pervasive passivity of interfaith. What I hope this section does is bring the conflict front and center to the minds of all those who do interfaith work, and who claim to want to create social change. Bednarowski quoting Judith Plaskow reminds that “any understating of Israel must begin with the recognition that Israel is a

²⁴⁵ Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 66.

community”²⁴⁶ as much as it is a space. And bringing in the work of Judith Butler, we also must recognize that Palestine is as well.²⁴⁷

As a Peace Studies educator, Esther sees interfaith as an opportunity to “put the problem in the middle” and “try to assess how we can solve it or transform it.” What is unique about interfaith, is that while politics would like to put religion in the middle as the “problem,” Esther points out that “interfaith is already telling us that you are not like me,” the space itself already establishes that there are differences but “you and I are not against each other, but are trying to solve a problem, or transform a conflict” that is impacting both of us, maybe in unique and different ways. Or maybe the initial problem is only affecting one of us, but we all can see that the derivation of that problem, such as antisemitism, islamophobia, or racism could impact other communities.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is the “elephant in the room,” a presence that “colors” most interfaith spaces – especially when Jewish and Muslim participants are present. However, in interfaith spaces, whether it’s advocacy or activism the Israel/Palestine conflict affects many diasporic communities. Land acknowledgements also provide an opportunity, according to Asma, to create connections to other indigenous peoples and other lands like Palestine, Kashmir, and Pakistan. However, this association also creates a challenge for institutional interfaith. The politics of land become contentious. For example, Gloria remembers one interfaith meeting in which a presentation was given on the water protectors, at one point a parallel was drawn between the indigenous communities protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline and the struggle of the Palestinian people. A Jewish member of the interfaith council felt that by drawing this

²⁴⁶ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 121.

²⁴⁷ Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*.

comparison his Jewish religion was being attacked by virtue of Israel being critiqued. Whether mentioned or not, whether what is being discussed has anything to do with Israel or not, as one contributor said: “it is this thing that provides some tension” in every institutional interfaith space. Institutional interfaith has a difficult time engaging, addressing, or even acknowledging the conflict. Even in this project, the difficulty persists.

More than any other physical location, Israel elicits the most stress and contention within interfaith spaces. Because contributors experiences and critiques are personal, with political implications, comments in this section are not attributed to a specific person but presented based on religious affiliation alone.²⁴⁸

[Israel] is not something that I necessarily lead with, particularly in interfaith spaces. – Jewish Contributor

The problem is that the moment you start talking about Israel and Palestine is the moment everybody pulls a verse from their scripture. And the moment you start reciting verses from the scripture is the moment everybody is paralyzed, because you can't argue with scripture, especially in this part of the world. The Jews start talking about the scriptures. The Christians start claiming that this part of the world as theirs. The Muslims do too, and that's why the conversations fail, because they're not allowing themselves to see beyond religion. – Muslim Contributor

Though these interfaith organizations might want to leave ‘politics’ out of the dialogue space, the political leaders who are trying to reach agreements, according to one Jewish contributor, rarely include religious leaders in the ‘peace talks’ are taking place. This does not mean that religion is absent from the room. As Massey reminds us “each place is a node of relations, an internal complexity.”²⁴⁹ That is regardless of the room, political leaders are never just political leaders. They bring with them their social positions and religious beliefs. One Jewish contributor offers that religious ‘actors’ are left out of conversations because they are

²⁴⁸ This came at the request of a Muslim contributor

²⁴⁹ Massey, *The Doreen Massey Reader*, 325.

“spoilers to both sides,” Israel and Palestine. However, there is also no false hope that “a bunch of faith leaders in Orange County” are going to solve the conflict. Often religious leaders are constrained by organizational hierarchies, unable to make any decisions or implement any real changes on a conflict 10,000 miles away. One Jewish contributor posits that people of faith are more likely “to have identity conversations and forget about the politics.” What this means is that religious actors that are motivated by morality and a desire for peace are more willing to see the humanity in the other, more willing to engage with the complexity that is required for social change. However, even non-leaders are often ideologically (or possibly monetarily) tied to the space which creates tensions and a “glaring inability to have discourse.” For example, there are many institutional interfaith organizations, as well as intentional interfaith efforts, that are tied to and heavily influenced by pro-Israel organization such as the Anti-Defamation League.

After multiple attacks on Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and other houses of worship many contributors noticed an institutional effort to bring the community together, but as one Christian contributor noted, this does not happen in connection with Israel and Palestine. After political and religious unrest, specifically on the issue of Israel and Palestine, like the June 2021 Israeli attack on Palestine, one Muslim contributor offered, it seems that there are “no safe conversations to be had” in institutional interfaith spaces. There is often no collective interfaith response to the conflict. One contributor, disheartened by the lack of communal interfaith response, speculates that the lack of response is based in a fear that by criticizing Israel, they would offend Jewish members of the interfaith community. But for those that have deeper relationships, conversations are happening right away, through phone calls, text messages, and lunches.

Some hope that the United States can be the ‘common ground,’ or a “neutral ground”²⁵⁰ for the conflict to be discussed, but the United States is so politically and monetarily married to Israel, this ‘hope’ is an example of cruel optimism. The United States’ attachment to Israel is one that has become comfortable, but is also a threat to institutional interfaith’s ability to be more inclusive. This becomes apparent as we acknowledge that, as one Jewish contributor shared, there are “two diasporic communities that are so deeply connected to the story that's happening over there.” While no one in this project would deny the need to humanize the other, the way that Jewish contributors speak about the process offers an affectual disconnect that privileges the Jewish community by assuming that the Palestinians have “no knowledge, no understanding, [and] no willingness to engage in the idea that the Jewish people have a similar, very deep rooted historical religious connection.” Though there is a verbal acknowledgement that Israelis and Jews talk about a Jewish state, without “thought about the other people who also have a deep historical religious connection to that same space.” Dina Georgis observed that “each group tells a story of historic victimization, and each story elaborates the necessity to fight and defend against the threat of the other.”²⁵¹ One Jewish contributor offered the “hubris of exclusivity” as the biggest barrier to finding a way forward in the conversation of Israel and Palestine. What this means is that both sides create an “identity story about themselves and their relationship to Israel” which often “erases the identity and the story of the other side.” For one Muslim contributor, it was hard to see the multidimensional identities of others, especially Israel supporters. For a time this woman saw a Jewish person as synonymous with an Israel supporter and “there was nothing more to them.”

²⁵⁰ Brenner, Nurete in Alvizo and Messina, *Women Religion Revolution*. 129

²⁵¹ Georgis, *The Better Story: Queer Affects From the Middle East*, 24.

One Jewish contributor offered her analysis of the unique challenge of Muslim and Jewish dialogue, sharing that the religious aspects of identity have been “co-opted by politics” creating a “vicious cycle.” This is not a reductive assessment, but an acknowledgement of “a political conflict, that has deep religious overtones.” Determining that it is “really problematic” to see the conflict as only religious. However, another Jewish participant argues that when it comes to an individual’s personal identity, “it’s got nothing to do with politics.” What this means is that in interfaith spaces, although Israel is part of identity for “a Jewish person” it is not their job to “tell the Israel story.” There is a minority perspective that motivates Jewish participants to advocate for the Jewish community, claiming that “there needs to be a safe place for Jews, because the world is not safe for Jews.”

Muslim contributors across the board have been given stereotypes, and have had negative, if not uncomfortable, experiences with Jewish people. At one intentional interfaith event, held at a synagogue, a Jewish woman approached a Muslim contributor and told her: “we don’t agree with what is happening to your people.” This experience made her cry because it was the first time she had heard someone from the Jewish community, “the community that supposedly hates me... telling me, we know were wrong.” Though this sentiment was not explicitly extended by Jewish contributors to this project, another contributor spoke of a conversation she had with a Jewish woman after she presented on Islam at a synagogue who espoused a lot of negative stereotypes but at the end said: “honey, I just want to put you in my pocket and take you home.” Language that signifies a reduction in negative feelings toward Muslims along with an air of superiority that simultaneously belittles Shaheen.

Religion and politics are so “embedded” with each other that, “unfortunately, people use their religion to their benefit. They do it on both sides, on all sides.” And both sides are critical.

In *The Faith Club*, the Muslim participant shared her disappointment with the Jewish participant:

I had taken a brave stand vis-a-vis my own religion. I had been critical of those Muslims who I felt distorted and manipulated holy text for their own political gain. Now I wanted Priscilla to do the same. I wanted her to go further than she’d ever thought of going, to examine and articulate how her religion was being used by some people to justify territorial claims.²⁵²

Going further is something that many contributors struggle with. While some have participated in the niche interfaith effort of Muslim-Jewish dialogue, it seems to be a primarily Jewish pursuit. Butler critiques many of these “coexistence projects that seek to cultivate cultural goodwill” as remaining “problematic” because “they fail to address the structure of settler colonialism.”²⁵³ Thus, it is apparent that while Jewish interfaith efforts are overtly motivated to eliminate antisemitism, they may also be an attempt to justify the Jewish state of Israel.

One program that focuses on Muslim and Jewish relationships does so for two reasons. First, there are specific experiences that these groups share as minorities in America, and therefore there are specific issues that “they need to be allied on.” For example, one Jewish contributor believes that Muslims and Jews are “uniquely poised to be supportive of each other” and hopes “that Muslim women feel less alone in this country.” But, since there are also serious and deep rifts between these two groups, addressing their specific challenges without them being diluted or disregarded by the presence of a third religion, specifically Christianity, is imperative to moving toward allyship. Here it is important to note location of engagement and individual connections to the land of Palestine. As one Jewish contributor acknowledged, it is a challenge to

²⁵² Idliby, Oliver, and Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, and A Jew - Three Women Search for Understanding*, 131.

²⁵³ Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, 216.

get Palestinian Muslims to participate in the dialogues because many live in areas not geographically accessible to this dialogue program, but also there may be fear and distrust of the program on the part of Palestinian Muslims. The Muslims that do end up participating are often South Asian and therefore do not have the same connection to the land on which the conflict is taking place. This lack of representation makes it hard to have a conversation on such a contentious issue. Thus, the space one is coming from as well as the space in which the other is encountered is significant.

Chapter 3 Cultivating an Interfaith Ethic

The interfaith spaces which exist in homes, houses of worship, or civic centers only become such as a result of an engagement amongst the religiously diverse bodies in an interfaith way. Aisha (Muslim) contends that in America, “everywhere I go... is literally an interfaith space.” However, using Sahib’s (Sikh) more discerning definition, interfaith requires engagement rather than just religious diversity. When these bodies are encountered, with the intention of interfaith engagement, disorientation is inevitable but not unfavorable. The reorienting toward these others makes them available to each other.²⁵⁴

Mark Twain suggested that “travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.” One argument of this project is that interfaith participants must travel physically and ideologically in order to encounter each other, which in turn has the potential to eradicate prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness. Borrowing from James Clifford’s ideas in *Traveling Cultures*,²⁵⁵ this project looks at interfaith as a cultural phenomenon that exists here, and there. In a globalized society “difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood” and “the familiar turns up at the end of the earth.”²⁵⁶ Whether travel or migration is voluntary or not, movement “involves an encounter with others.”²⁵⁷ As we “learn to travel,” According to Maria Lugones, we can also “learn to love” those whose worlds we enter and encounter.²⁵⁸ Regardless of the distance, whether physical or mental, one must travel to be in other spaces, the practice of travel began at an early age and the engagement with other cultures fortified their ability to

²⁵⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 53.

²⁵⁵ Clifford, James. 1992. *Traveling Cultures*. Cultural Studies. Routledge, New York, NY.

²⁵⁶ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, 14.

²⁵⁷ Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

²⁵⁸ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, 56.

engage with religious others. When subjects travel to interfaith spaces, they will inevitably travel back ‘home’ (even just to visit).

Religious diversity is encountered in homes, neighborhoods, schools, and religious spaces. Growing up in an interfaith home with a Buddhist father from Vietnam and a Catholic mother from Australia instilled in Leslie the qualities of an interfaith ethic. For those that were born and raised in the United States, specifically non-Christians, many cite being raised in diverse communities as the first condition that prepared them to engage with religious diversity. Their daily encounters require them to translate, interpret, and at times, be mutually indifferent when engaging with the diversity around them.²⁵⁹

At least fourteen of the non-Christians reflect on encounters with religious diversity that took place at an early age. Most Christians, on the other hand, being associated with the dominant religion in the United States, didn’t acknowledge religious diversity is becoming aware that there are ‘other religions’ or enter interfaith spaces until a World Religions course in college or after a major tragedy like 9/11. When reflecting on interfaith opportunities, many Christians exhibited their Christian privilege by acknowledging that they did not have interfaith encounters with obvious diversity until later in life. However, in the United States non-Christians and non-whites experience interfaith as the other – the one who is encountered. For Christians, interfaith is experienced as encountering the other. Whereas for many contributors from non-Christian traditions their first interfaith experience consists of making others, the dominant group (read: Christians) aware of their non-Christian tradition. For example, while many Christian contributors mark their first interfaith experience taking place in high school or college, Naima’s (Christian raised Buddhist) first experience was in pre-school and Elif’s (Muslim) as at a third

²⁵⁹ Bender and Kassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, 17.

grade pizza party. She discovered that Jews, like her don't eat pepperoni. In this moment, nine-year-old Elif had the realization that bridges can be built between people who are different. When it comes to institutional interfaith engagements, both Sahib (Muslim) and Shaheen (Muslim) grew up attending churches and synagogues with friends.

One of Asma's (Muslim) first intentional interfaith experiences was attending "different faith spaces" with her mosque's youth group, though the encounters were not "framed in a pluralistic way." Asma remembers sitting in different faith spaces with her friends, criticizing and judging the space, service, and people in an effort to prove to themselves that Islam was superior. Rather than being an interfaith experience, the result was a reinforcement of tribalism. This is an example of "lazy and irresponsible" pluralism.²⁶⁰ In middle school Yuna (Muslim) visited a church: "I just remember being terrified." As the priest "dipped a brush like thing²⁶¹ in holy water and then went around flinging it everyone. I just remember thinking 'the water can't touch me.'" In the time we spent together, Yuna created a link between that first experience, being 'terrified' of holy water, to ten years later being "knee deep in water," participating in a Buddhist ritual at the Shinnyo-en Lantern Floating Festival in Hawaii.²⁶² Interfaith participation didn't change her religious affiliation, but it made her more open to experience. In addition, interfaith as a form of pluralism is ineffective unless "emancipatory knowledge and wisdom" is cultivated which, according to Kwok Pui Lan, "must be done in community,"²⁶³ specifically a diverse community. According to Rosalie (Jewish), "we are intentionally made diverse. Diversity is our birthright." So, while pluralism is ideally an "energetic engagement with

²⁶⁰ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 113.

²⁶¹ I assume that this was an aspergillum

²⁶² "I actually haven't reflected on that until you asked this question."

²⁶³ Kwok Pui Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 25.

diversity” and an “active seeking of understanding across lines of difference,”²⁶⁴ if it is thought of as a “birthright” and not a “responsibility”²⁶⁵ it will have little benefit.

Often, awareness of and experience with religious and cultural difference is the result of organic everyday encounters. As an immigrant to the US, Fatima (Muslim) connected with her Armenian Orthodox neighbor. Although they held different religious beliefs, their Middle Eastern culture provided a foundation of their relationships. She didn’t know that they were ‘doing’ interfaith, she just knew that she had a “cozy feeling” being in her friend’s home, learning about Christian symbolism, observing “beautiful rituals,” and eating delicious food. They were just friends sharing in experiences that were important. By the time Fatima entered her Catholic high school, as one of the few Muslims, and the only one that covered, she was “doing interfaith in every classroom.” Fatima’s mosque, like Asma’s, also made efforts to introduce the youth to religious diversity. However, unlike Asma’s mosque, according to Fatima, her mosque was a “pioneering institution when it came to interfaith” that understood and taught pluralism as “part of the fabric of America.”

Following Lugones’ logic, Yael is hopeful that by bringing her Jewish youth to the Mosque and by inviting Muslim youth into the Synagogue they will “know another world” and they will begin to cultivate love. As they begin to realize that “we are so much the same, more than we are different,” not in belief or practice but values and morals, in affect. The travel that is required for these kids to enter another house of worship, moves them out of their comfort zone. Yael hopes that in the future, “when my Jewish teens encounter Islamophobia, they’ll have a very real and personal reason to react. They won’t say: “I’m not Muslim, it’s not my problem”

²⁶⁴ Eck, Diana in Bender and Kassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, 9.

²⁶⁵ Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*.

because they will know someone. So, like Elif, Yael hopes that someday “when they’re driving down the street and they pass by a mosque and their kids ask: “What is that?” They can answer that question.” Because they will know someone who goes into the building.

Growing up Gloria danced at the Jewish community center, took yoga classes at the Unitarian church, discovered Baha’i teachings from a high school friend, read books on Confucianism and Hinduism, and took a comparative religion class. Attending mass with her Filipino Catholic neighbors, Martha remembers having to “sit at the rosary table and pray with the rosary beads” when entering their home and having her pockets stuffed with lemon leaves to keep evil spirits away. Growing up in New York and Milwaukee, the churches Mildred attended had close relationships to the Jewish community which lead to the Christian community being invited to bar and bat mitzvahs, and the Jewish community being invited to confirmations. At Christmas time in Milwaukee, Mildred remembers “half the stage was the story of Hanukkah, the other half of the stage was the Christmas pageant.” On the other hand, some contributors grew up with the social privileges of being white and Christian in communities that lacked racial, ethnic, or religious diversity (Read: non-white, non-Christian). While Sally was not aware of religious difference in her small Arizona farming town, she remembers her family attending a bar mitzvah when she was young. She assumes the invitation was the result of a friendship that her parents had. Emily was raised in Northern Wyoming where religious diversity consisted of Mormons, Catholics, and Lutherans. According to her, “it was Eden.” Emily characterizes the community as a “monochrome” except for Hispanic farm workers, Japanese families that were “relocated,” and one Black family that moved to a town 20 miles away. It wasn’t until she served a mission for her church in England that she was exposed to people of other faiths. While Emily articulates that she “didn’t learn to differentiate” it is apparent that racial and religious differences are

noticed. When we recognize the arrival of difference, whether racial or religious, Ahmed suggests that noticing “such arrivals tells us more about what is already in place than it does about “the who” that arrives.”²⁶⁶ One of the challenges facing members of dominant groups, even when they don’t ‘feel’ that they are bigoted, because they are comfortable in ‘Eden’ they have no reason to question if the community might not be paradise for others. Or as Ida articulates, the dominant group (read: white Christians) has never had to “stop and consider” if the community serves everyone.

Affect: (dis)comfort and (in)convenience

According to McCarthy, in order for encounters “to be meaningful” they must “engage participants at a personal, existential level,”²⁶⁷ in other words, they must be affective. By utilizing affectual methodology to understand interfaith experiences, every encounter becomes informative. Johnny “vividly” remembers telling a Muslim classmate that “he was going to hell” and now feeling “fucking horrible” about it; the irritation, hurt, and frustration LGBTQ contributors have felt when engaging with those from conservative religious traditions; and the discomfort others have felt when considering the inclusion of atheists in interfaith spaces; to the joy and surprise Jewish and Muslim contributors have experienced when they discover that their burial practices are virtually the same. As a religious educator, Zaha (Muslim) recognizes that most of the information she presents could be found through a few google searches but believes: “It is not about the information that you pass as much as it is about how you pass that information.” It is the affect of the experience between two people that strengthens understanding. Mildred asserts that “once you get to sit down with someone and know more

²⁶⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 133.

²⁶⁷ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 117.

about their story and their why you can't help but connect in some way." We connect because of resonance. Thus, it is after we are willing to listen to, learn from, and understand the other on their own terms, that we can start to make connection to our own experiences.²⁶⁸ It is not that you are 'like' me because of our commonalities, but I connect with you because there is something about you that resonates with me, in a different way. And because of our differences I connect with myself and my tradition in a deeper way. For example, one contributor spoke of the difficulty she had when wiccans participated an intentional interfaith space: "It just seemed really weird to have them there, I just couldn't teach." It is not that she had lost the ability to teach, but the affect of having a religious other that she did not understand made it affectively impossible to engage in a meaningful way.

Most religious experiences are based on affect. The premise of religious or spiritual truth is one of subjective feelings, rather than objective facts. Coming from white rural Michigan, Joan's decision to attend a private university in Orange County came down to an "overwhelming sense of peace," a feeling that was especially poignant when she entered the interfaith center. Affect prioritizes resonance over reason.²⁶⁹ Affect is also recognizing those spaces and things that make us uncomfortable to which Fatima (Muslim) cautions: do "not discount your intuition and your gut feelings," for better or worse. Throughout this project I have tried to pay attention to the feelings expressed, and the feelings felt. It is not what is explicitly said, but what is implicitly understood that creates resonance and connection, and what I argue is the essence of interfaith. Interfaith that is affectively aligned is characterized by desires for personal edification and the building of genuine relationships. Affective experiences create resonance allowing for

²⁶⁸ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 76.

²⁶⁹ Militz, Faria, and Schurr, "Affectual Intensities: Writing with Resonance as Feminist Methodology," 4.

participants to connect “heart to heart”, as Shaheen describes. This is possible when, as Amyra and Fatima share, we begin to understand “each other’s stories and backgrounds” and learn “about one another’s practices and beliefs,” not in relation to our own, but on their own.

One of Shaheen’s (Muslim) earliest memories is in a grocery store with her mother. Shaheen remembers a man “trying” to tell her mother to “scoot over.” He made “a mean comment to her” and her mom became “flustered.” Shaheen “knew it was mean because her eyes got teary.” At that moment Shaheen made a decision: “one day I’m gonna dress really funky to show people that just because you look different does not mean that you’re not worthy of dignity or don’t have an intellect or heart.” As a graduate student at Harvard University, Shaheen got the chance. She was running late to the first day of her World Religion’s class, as a teaching fellow. As she entered the room wearing traditional Bangladesh clothing, because she hadn’t had time to change, and a scarf, an elderly man looked at her and screamed: “Honey, I’m so glad that you people are getting educated,” he continued: “in this country, you don’t have to wear that anymore.” Shaheen smiled, then made her way to the front of the room as she was introduced by the professor as the teaching fellow, along with her academic credentials. At the end of class, the man approached Shaheen and said: “You made me realize the stereotypes I had. I clearly judged you by the way you looked.” This example highlights the affective and productive function of discomfort. Shaheen understands it as the price of change. Her hope is that he will remember the experience and share it with his peers, “that’s how change happens.”

Growing up in a mixed neighborhood in Chicago one of Rosalie’s (Jewish) first jobs was drawing Christmas images on store fronts. In school, both Christian and Jewish songs were performed, and this is where she first experienced a “clash in faiths.” She shares: “I have never actually talked about this before” remembering being “terribly moved by the Christian carols”

Rosalie considers what it means for her “as a Jew to be so drawn to the music of a majority religion.” The resonance that Rosalie felt is an affective experience. She connected with the carols on a level that later in life allowed her to connect with people of faith, other than her own. The affective experience of connecting to the carols did not make the distinction between ‘us and them’ disappear but allowed a bridge to be built between.

In engaging with her Jewish friend, especially on the topic of Israel-Palestine, Asma reflects on the compassion and love she wants to continually cultivate. Her motivation to enter inconvenient friendships is a measure of enacting an interfaith ethic. “I want to learn to love without condition, ... Our friendships are not supposed to be convenient... It's much more convenient for me to be a friend to a Palestinian Muslim... it's easy, it's natural, it's habitual, it requires no extra work.” Leila sees women as being willing to do this work: “I have always believed in women’s ability to be wise and build connections, even in the most impossible spaces.” Contemplating these inconvenient friendships, Asma sees them as a to action. These relationships require her to say: “I love you, not despite this, but even with this part of you. I see all of you.” Reflecting on another relationship with a woman who is of a different faith and who she disagrees with politically, she asks: “What do I do? Do I walk away from that love?” That is impossible for her to do so, she asks another question: “How do I love, even when it’s difficult? Even when it's inconvenient?” Asma’s response, which utilizes an interfaith ethic also foregrounds what many imagine is possible for the future of interfaith, that is living the complexity even though it is uncomfortable. Asma tries to sit with the discomfort and asks what it tells her about herself. The result is the knowledge that she can “love and be loved” which is ‘good enough.’

Fear and Envy

When Zaha began participating in interfaith spaces, she received questions from her faith community like: “Why do you want to do that? How many will convert? What's the purpose of this?” To which she responds: “Well, I'm doing it because I love it.” She works from the perspective that she can enter any space, engage with any community, and build relationships because she has decided to “act and not react.”²⁷⁰ When Yael was in High School, she was inspired by a progressive youth leader to petition her school to start a world religions club. The students were on board, but the administration was afraid that it would get “political” and “sow division,” assuming that the students “weren't mature enough to handle it.” She was discouraged but her personal curiosity continued. “I always just felt it was important to seek out people of other religions to know what other religions believed.” When there is a lack of curiosity, fear fills the void. Fear is an affective experience and there is fear associated with interfaith. However, Ammerman contends that “ordinary people” are not threatened or afraid of alternative religious beliefs.²⁷¹ But some are, so who are they? And what are they afraid of?

Do people really think that by observing another tradition, all of a sudden you will leave your own? - Betty

Dominant communities fear losing their positions of power. Minority communities fear harm and violence. Religionists fear that the focus will be placed on commonalities while ignoring differences, others fear that “somebody is going to try and change you.” The secularists fear that religion will “overwhelm” or “alienate” the non-religious. Helen assesses fear as a tool of those in power, to maintain control. According to Savitri, “fear is always of the unknown” and

²⁷⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 101.

²⁷¹ Ammerman, “The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity,” 155.

is one of the biggest impediments to connection. The other is a determination to avoid discomfort. Interfaith combats both. So, as understanding increases, fear can be reduced.

The religious literacy gained in interfaith spaces reduces fear. For Leslie, institutional interfaith spaces provide opportunities for individuals to “listen, discuss, and learn from each other.” The hope is that these educational experiences will lead to more understanding and more acceptance of people of other faiths. For Leslie this brings hope that “if you can engage with someone of a different faith” then maybe you can engage with “other differences too.”

If we have bought the premise that knowledge and experienced reduce fear, Patel asks:

What happens when we find beauty in faiths, we were raised to think were wrong, even evil? What happens when we discover that someone else lives the values of our faith better than we do, and they are of a different faith? What happens when we rely on our faith to help us through a catastrophe and find people from other faiths doing the same thing, finding a similar solace in different prayers?²⁷²

Sometimes, fear is not motivated by a desire to avoid discomfort but about a desire for self-preservation. Though Yael (Jewish) is committed to an interfaith ethic, acting on that ethic has taken time and courage. For Yael, and a lot of Jews, there is a constant worry of the motivations of Christians to convert others. “That’s not anything a Jewish person wants to open themselves up to.” When she was younger she had this “bizarre idea” that alarms would sound – “Jew, Jew, Jew” – when she entered a Church. This fear that has since subsided. Eventually her curiosity overpowered her fear and she realized that she is “completely free to walk into almost any religious institution in the country as a guest” and identify herself as such.

²⁷² Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, 91.

According to Geertz, “fear is experience-near”²⁷³ and as such must be overcome through experience-near interactions. In a diverse society like the United States, fear is a more common ‘experience’ than phobia (experience-far) because most people are at least aware of religious diversity. Often individuals can justify not participating in interfaith because they don’t ‘hate’ religious others, they are simply ‘afraid’ of them. It is difficult for Sally to hear and see people in her own congregation, and Christians in general, being persuaded by “negative reports” and “hearsay” about members of specific faith communities and then they pigeonholed “the entire faith.” Sally believes that the best way to counter stereotypes and fear that is produced is through “firsthand experience.” Fear can be reduced and misinformation corrected when individuals meet with and learn directly from those who practice a faith.

These are questions that interfaith participants have encountered and conquered through holy envy. Reflecting on the Jewish people, Sahib appreciates that they are “always questioning things” and has tried to “internalized and imbibe” that value in herself. Though she is not religious, Emma experiences holy envy as she learned how to read the Bible from a Rabbi, and learned about Buddhism in Japan. Whether holy envy or holy preservation in a Christian nation, both Sahib and Deborah share their holy respect for Jesus, and what they understand him to represent. There is something about striving to be “Christ-like” that resonates, even if they do not believe in his divinity. Even when we find things in other faiths to be envious of, or attracted to, does not mean that we will convert or that we should start appropriating those beliefs and practices. What Taylor has found is that her holy envy has actually helped her fall deeper in love

²⁷³ Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 57.

with her own tradition.²⁷⁴ A feeling that many contributors share and will be discussed more in chapter five.

Resonance

Interfaith spaces provide intellectual, as well as affectual experiences. Affect is a type of knowledge gained through resonance. For Madeline (Episcopalian) it is an experience that allows her to see “the way God works in the world and, the ways people experience God” in so doing she “can find something familiar,” something that resonates. Interfaith provides a space in which we begin to see others as full and complex human being with multi-faceted experiences, beliefs, interpretations, desires, and hopes. Resonance across religious difference is manifested in values, practices, and the purposes of religion.

When Rachel, as a Jewish person, hears the Muslim prayer she “starts to get these resonances,” she says: “because you can hear the similarities in the structure of the prayer, the language sounds the same.” The affect of sound is Teresa’s medium of worship. After offering a Buddhist chant at an interfaith event, Teresa was approached by a Catholic woman and said: “Your chanting, that sound was so beautiful. I don’t know what it is.” Teresa explained to her that it is the sound that matters. “The sound has spirit in it. It’s not that you need to understand it with your intellect, but it spoke to your heart, your soul, and that’s what chanting does.” With this knowledge we can understand why, when Emma who is not religious, hears the Muslim call to prayer, she is moved to tears.

When resonating with others, it is tempting, as Taylor articulates, “to try to translate everything into [our] own religious language.” However, she continues: “[we] miss a lot when

²⁷⁴ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 63.

[we] persist in reducing everything to [our] own frame of reference.”²⁷⁵ Thus for Bhabha the “language metaphor” often highlights the “ethnocentric notion of the pluralistic existence of cultural diversity.”²⁷⁶ Eck contends that in order to move past diversity, which is the social fact of difference, we must “work together across the lines of religious difference to create a sociality in which we actually know one another.”²⁷⁷ In other words, diversity exists, but can only be engaged with in a pluralistic way if that diversity is translatable and understandable for the dominant group. For example, Patel uses a quote attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr, about Ghandi. “It is one of the strange ironies of the modern world that the greatest Christian of the twentieth century was not a member of the Christian church.”²⁷⁸ The motivation to make statements that bring others into ‘our’ understanding of faith, to search for similarities and appreciate what the other has to offer rather than dismissing them out of hand, is noble. However, it means that we must employ our imagination to make the other ‘look’ and ‘act’ and ‘sound’ like us before we can see and hear them as a valid and worthy equal. What happens if we no longer consider Ghandi as an (un-baptized) Christian but King as a (baptized) Hindu. What if we saw King’s interpretation of Christianity as an imitation of the world’s oldest ethical tradition, rather than Hinduism as primitive of Christianity? I am not suggesting that interfaith encourages these shifts, but it does make us more aware of the double standards and contradictions.

Resonance is not finding direct commonalities or similarities, a full understanding or comprehension of the other, nor is it agreeing with the other or believing what they believe, but

²⁷⁵ Taylor, 34.

²⁷⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 253.

²⁷⁷ Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, 22.

²⁷⁸ Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, 150.

is a willingness to feel. While an unwillingness to feel leads to a lack of understanding, resonance is the result of a willingness to feel even when we don't or can't understand. Resonance "engages the untranslatable or incommensurable without necessarily trying to render it understandable or legible on familiar terms."²⁷⁹ In other words resonance allows you to connect feeling with a belief or practice that is different in process but same in affect. In interfaith spaces, and relationships, resonance transcends theological and dogmatic differences. It is a type of knowledge that leads to deep relationships. Fatima's experiences offer example of the resonance that occurs in organic interfaith spaces.

According to Aisha (Muslim), there is an assumption that sharing the same culture and faith will lead to connection, but for her and Zaha (Muslim) that is not the case. Though they don't always feel like they "fit in" with immigrant Arab communities, there is something about interfaith communities that has always felt "like home." For example, as Muslim immigrants from Syria, Fatima's (Muslim) parents made the decision to send her to a Catholic high school so that she could be in a space with students and families who share the same values and morals "around compassion and justice, and modesty and goodness," regardless of the religious education. The spiritual experiences of religious people are affectual experiences, they are experiences of resonance, and for those that engage in interfaith work, they transcend religious spaces, communities, and dogmas. Offering another example, when Fatima and her husband were living in Northern California, she found herself drawn to families in their apartment complex that were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Though she had Muslims neighbors, she didn't feel culturally connected to them. "I found that I shared a lot of the same morals and values with the Mormon community. A lot of them were

²⁷⁹ May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 244.

young families with young kids like us.” Fatima chose to build community based on morals and values more than religious tradition, because as she points out, religion is “just one part.” Other than religion she didn’t have much in common with the other Muslims in her complex. Similarly, Elif made a point to say that she “really bonded” with her Mormon friends, because they were raised in similar ways, with similar values, including modesty and avoidance of alcohol. The ‘common ground’ of morals and values, along with their shared cultural references of American books, movies, and music, allowed their relationship to flourish.

For Patricia, the resonance experienced in interfaith relationships is analogous to a resonance between “fine tequila and fine vodka” suggesting they have more in common with each other than their “bad” counterparts. Likewise, Patricia feels that she has more in common with someone who is trying to deepen their own faith than someone from the same faith tradition that is simply going through the motions or is affiliated in name only. In other words, common values are more important than common identities. This is the principle of homophily in action, “while people are mixed with those of other religious affiliations in the public square, they still tend to seek out others who are religiously similar.”²⁸⁰ In other words, whether or not individuals actually identify with “the very same religious tradition,” their friends are religiously or spiritually similar and are more likely to report having conversations about religious topics.”²⁸¹

Yael agrees with this assessment:

Finding Asma, who was interested in a lot of the same things that I am. As passionate about her religion and her culture as I am about mine. We're the same as much as we're different. She understands my work better than a lot of my Jewish friends who happen not to be religious.

²⁸⁰ Scheitle and Smith, “A Note on the Frequency and Sources of Close Interreligious Ties,” 420.

²⁸¹ Ammerman, “Finding Religion in Everyday Life. *Sociology of Religion*,” 199.

Likewise, Linda's Christian coworker informed her: "I knew from the beginning we were going to be friends because you're practicing your religion and I'm practicing my religion and we behave in a certain way." Linda's analysis of her coworker's observation is that "only the people who put religion in an important place in their life would want to connect with you, because they see that same thing in you." To drive this point home, Kunti shared that she has always felt very connected to her Hindu tradition, and finding people who are "longing for God," even if it is not in the same faith has been important to her. When Kunti, as an "extremely religious" Hindu, bucked expectations and went to fashion school, she found her community with Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Her Protestant friend taught Sunday School, her Catholic friend went to mass every morning, and Kunti would go to the temple every week. For example, the first iteration of a Muslim-Jewish dialogue group that Rachel was a part of was terribly mismatched. As she describes it, the group was made up of conservative Shia Muslims and liberal Jews who would feel "more comfortable putting on a hijab than walking into a synagogue." While these two groups did not continue to meet, a lesson was learned. It is not that their differences prevented them from gaining intellectual knowledge, but the lack of resonance between them prevented a relationship from being formed. This groups of friends bonded over the value that religion brought to their lives, rather than the religion itself. "No matter how hard we partied on Saturday, I would pull my ass to the temple on Sunday at 11 o'clock." When Kunti first met Imam Khalid, she remembers "I'd never met a person who's brown like me, who's devoutly religious like I am, though he's Muslim, [and] born and raised here." These connections, helped to fortify a strong friendship. For Carole seeking out an interfaith community in college was an intentional decision, wanting to find a "built in community with values." Following a similar logic, Amyra used her understanding of Zoroastrian teachings to

focus on good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, that she sees in other religions, attributing them to God.

In addition to morals and values, many contributors resonate with the spiritual practices of other religious traditions as well. For example, in the mid 80's Rosalie became aware of Passover Seders being held in African American churches, by the Catholic Workers of Los Angeles, at a Women's shelter, an Alcoholics Anonymous group, and in a Prison. Attending some of these rituals, she was impressed that they were not 'Christianized' in any way. These communities performed the seder because of their connection to the story, because the struggle for freedom resonates. Similarly, many contributors have participated in Ramadan fasts and others have adopted the tradition of reading through the Quran during the month of Ramadan, but like Teresa, they do it in their own way. Thinking about her Muslim friend and neighbor, Teresa assumes that they are not offended by her adaptations but finds it "comforting to know that their neighbor, nearby, supports you." Similarly, when Yuna attended a Buddhist temple, she resonated with the practices and purposes which lead her to learn more about meditation practices in Buddhism while also growing deeper in her understanding of Islam.

Articulating the experience of resonance, Jane acknowledged that other theologies and practices "may not necessarily mirror my faith but they still work, and work well." This does not mean that initial contacts are not awkward and uncomfortable. For example, as a Sikh, Sophia explains that she categorically avoids ritual in order to protect against ritualization but having observed rituals in a number of traditions she has resonated with rituals that others practice as a form of ritual doesn't mean it is taking them away from God. Sometimes that ritual is a necessity and allows them to feel closer to God." In this case Sophia is not resonating with the practice, but with the purpose.

Another example of resonance was experienced by Emily as she was “caught up in the same kind of excitement” visiting the Golden Temple in Amritsar and the Western Wall in Jerusalem as when she was part of the 1985 dance festival at the Rose Bowl sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There is sacred religious significance to both the Golden Temple and the Western Wall for Sikhs and Jews, respectively, that is objectively absent at the Rose Bowl. However, the resonance that Emily felt as she made a connection between these experiences tell us something of the role of community in affectively transforming a space. The excitement of reaching a place, religious or not, is intensified by the communal movement toward that place. Though Emily is not Sikh or Jewish and does not have a religious connection to Amritsar or Jerusalem, she could resonate with affect of experience the feeling of excitement that was palpable in all three places. The experience she resonated with was not explicitly religious or overtly spiritual, but cultural, and yet the feeling of knowing “we were all together, we were all Mormons together going up to the Rose Bowl” it felt the same. The same as all the Sikhs making their way to the Golden temple and all the Jews making their way to the Western Wall. The excitement of being in community resonates.

Connection

By focusing on connection rather than commonalities, relationships and communities are strengthened, and those discomforts and unknowns, according to Zainab (Muslim), have the potential to actually “bring us closer together.” While much of institutional interfaith attempts to create, build, and maintain connection by focusing on commonalities or similarities, if resonance isn’t felt community won’t be stable. By only focusing on religious and non-religious experiences that are familiar, the possibilities for deeper connection are hindered. Connection based on affect on resonance, elicits appreciation and holy envy. Cragg tells us: “To know is to

feel. To feel is to be in connection. To connect is to recognize others. To recognize others is to practice an interdependent way of life.”²⁸² Emma believes that as we create spaces for “challenging conversations” we are participating in “a sacred opportunity for connection.” By “exposing [ourselves] to someone else’s perspective” we engage in a “sacred act.” Connection acknowledges differences and honors them because of the yet-to-be-known ways that those difference might resonate and deepen the relationship. When differences are acknowledged, they challenge and ignite relationships in ways that can’t be ignored.

Interfaith relationships are formed through resonances that are not siloed in institutional interfaith spaces, as Kala articulates, “we make friends all the time that are not of our religion or nationality.” In fact, as someone who only recently began entering interfaith spaces, Kala candidly shares that she does not feel that these institutional interfaith spaces are building relationships. From her perspective, there has been a lot of “what can you give me” rather than a desire for reciprocal relationship building. Since friendship, according to Aihiokehahi, “involves the opening up of one’s heart to another with reciprocal care for the good of each other.”²⁸³ Organic spaces, specifically, as Fatima so beautifully articulates, allow for this opening, for us to expand our view of religion and spirituality “beyond just institutions and titles and roles... so our souls can connect.” Because, according to Emma, “religion is actually about community” the rituals one appropriates for themselves might be comforting “but unless it connects, there’s gonna be something lacking.” Therefore, connection protects against appropriation. Connection does not necessarily require intellectual knowledge but affectual experience. It requires us to

²⁸² Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

²⁸³ Aihiokehahi, “Locating the Place of Interreligious Friendship in Comparative Theology,” 150.

resonate with something in our body more than our mind, though these are not mutually exclusive knowledges.

Through Asma's participation in Muslim-Jewish dialogues, she has become aware of the similarities between Muslim and Jewish burial practices. While in practice the funeral services are "nearly identical" Asma acknowledges that "we approach it differently." Often if we focus on commonalities, or similarities, it allows us to superficially say we are the 'same'. But, by focusing on connection, we gain a deeper understanding of the why and how of practices. While differences may still cause disconnect, resonance allows for appreciation:

When somebody passes away, [Muslims] are thinking about it in terms of logistics. The body needs to go through these steps because that is what God has ordained for us. They believe God has these requirements, the body is supposed to be washed in this way, we have to be excellent in our washing of the body. When Jewish people are doing the exact same things, washing the body or enshrouding it, their burial practices have to do with relationships. They're centering the person who's mourning. That's how it was explained to me. That all of their burial practices are about centering the people who are mourning, the loss of that person and holding that person close and helping to hold them and their grief. When I learned about this I realized, actually, that's why Muslims are doing these steps too, but we've lost that. They've become hollow. We've become so obsessed with orthopraxy, or the ritual. We've gotten obsessed with the ritual practice of it, but lost the people-centric, the human-centric core of that practice. So, that was an example of where I think it's critical to understand our own [tradition]. I can't know Islam or understand this language of communicating with God, without understanding how other people understand the same things.

This exemplifies resonance as a requirement of connection. It is not enough that the materiality of mourning practices are similar, but the affect of the practices resonate. Connection is the product of resonance. When we feel connected to others, we experience resonance. Resonance is affectual knowledge, and affectual knowledge allows for connection when ideology or logic do not. According to Cragg, "spiritual knowledge, which is never purely

intellectual but always involves physical senses”²⁸⁴ is affectual knowledge. It is a knowledge “grounded in experience.”²⁸⁵ Therefore, connection can be found in values, practices, experiences, and sometimes in silence.

Love and Grief

In *The Female Complaint*, Berlant argues that “women generate an affective and intimate public sphere that seeks to harness the power of emotion.”²⁸⁶ In so doing, female suffering is universalized. Though the causes of pain are not universally experienced, the resonance of pain can lead to connection. Often, however, interfaith is limited when it comes to pain, suffering, and mourning, because of an unwillingness of individual faith communities to deal with difficult experiences of racism, sexism, inequality, and the emotions that come with these experiences. Very few, whether in a faith community or an interfaith space, want to confront the discomfort of pain, and that is a problem for Madeline. “I think this is a place that the church needs to be. That when there are people suffering we need to learn about them, reach out to them, and tell folks in Orange County who are not suffering about them.” Though this is Madeline’s call to her own church, the same direction can be offered to interfaith communities.

The universality of pain, as Chung argues, can be “the epistemological starting point for... [the] search for the meaning of full humanity.”²⁸⁷ Women, according to Esther, “see the pain of separations, the pain of conflict” which makes them more likely to “reach out to each other.” Using the example of Palestinian and Israeli women who come together because they know the pain of losing a child, and because they know there is “nothing glamorous” about

²⁸⁴ Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

²⁸⁵ Rayaprol, “Feminist Research: Redefining Methodology in the Social Sciences,” 371.

²⁸⁶ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 12.

²⁸⁷ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*, 39.

sending their children to war. Similarly, in Amma's healing room pain collapses boundaries²⁸⁸ because "all mothers cry when their sons are killed."²⁸⁹ The pain and joy of motherhood is one of the most common binding agents in these interfaith relationships. For example, Jane reflects on getting a call from Helen in the summer of 2020 that instigated a "crying session." Amidst rising racist incidents, Helen was calling out of concern for Jane, but Jane was just as concerned about Helen. Knowing that Helen has a black son, who is also married to a Muslim woman, Jane recognized the compounding threat "because you're not just talking about racism, you're talking about anti-muslim hate." These two women who initially were brought together in an interfaith space, found connection as mothers and identified the pain and grief that society was creating for them and their children.

Therefore, as pain is detected in another person, Lugones argues, connection is made between the ability to identify with an-other, and the ability to love them.²⁹⁰ Conversely, the failure to love is a failure to identify.²⁹¹ Which is the exact argument made by Kaur as she decries the United States for not seeing the suffering of the Sikh communities, communities of color, or immigrant communities, contending that "a nation that cannot grieve with us cannot know us, therefore cannot love us."²⁹² grief is impersonal. It is personal connections allows for the affect of grief as well as love. In the mid 90's the city of Huntington Beach instituted an interfaith taskforce to address hate crimes. Mildred remembers the institutional drive to "start putting together some bylaws" at the first meeting but one member paused and suggested: "wait a minute, I think that instead of getting organized we should take the first year to just fall in love

²⁸⁸ Fluekiger, *Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India*.

²⁸⁹ Fluekiger, 8.

²⁹⁰ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, 56.

²⁹¹ Lugones, 58.

²⁹² Kaur, Valarie, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, 57.

with each other.” And that is what they did. The time spent to get to know each other makes love and loss proximate, and thus communal and personal.²⁹³

Interfaith spaces create opportunities for communal grieving through vigils and prayer services. Vigils, by definition, are periods of time in which one stands, watches, and prays often after a tragedy. They are established spaces in which individuals can process grief, in community. These interfaith spaces are created based on an understanding, articulated by Kaur, that “you don’t need to know people in order to grieve with them. You grieve with them in order to know them.”²⁹⁴ Olivia’s observation and critique that “We don’t lament enough.” Her claim is that lamenting together, “makes us feel stronger, makes us more compassionate” thus supporting Kaur who argues that: “When we allow ourselves to be changed by the experience of another’s pain, we build bonds with people we once called strangers. Sharing in one another’s grief can also lead to sharing in one another’s joy.”²⁹⁵ There is a clear interpretation of interfaith that it should do more than create understanding and cooperation.

What is required to mourn, grieve, and lament when one is not personally harmed? For those who are being mourned with, it is an experience of being acknowledged and supported. For those who are choosing to mourn, regardless of personal experience, is a “deepening in the individual’s relation to [their] inner objects”²⁹⁶ as well as external relationships. The most common experience of mourning is found in death. Contributors to this project have lost spouses, parents, siblings, and friends. Each death provides an opportunity for deeper connection and to provide service to those in pain, to make the grief personal. Suffering creates a bridge over

²⁹³ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, 75.

²⁹⁴ Kaur, Valarie, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, 59.

²⁹⁵ Kaur, Valarie, 58.

²⁹⁶ Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 408.

constructed boundaries, and therefore when we understand suffering, we begin to connect with others in a way that is beautiful and deep.

Linda (Muslim) and her family returned to the United States after living in the middle east for seven years. In order to help her three children adjust academically she began homeschooling. Through a homeschooling cooperative her daughter built a friendship with a Christian girl whose mother had developed cancer and passed away. Linda and her daughter attended the funeral. After the service another mother from the cooperative, who was Jewish, shared with Linda that many of the families were surprised that Linda attended the funeral. Linda's response: "Are we not human?" Linda admits that she was "taken aback and offended." As she relayed this painful experience she began to cry. She continued: "Don't people do this for each other? I don't have to know them well to feel for those people." Trying to ease Linda's distress, this Jewish mother who became a close friend, explained that when Linda showed up to the funeral: "It showed us who you were in a way that just seeing you day to day didn't." This encounter opened opportunities for relationships that had previously been hindered by what Linda perceived as fear and discomfort of the Christian parents, and their inability to reach out to Linda. This experience also created a new friendship between these two women. As their children grew, they "became closer and closer" and she was the first person Linda told when she decided to get a divorce. It was during this time that Linda felt like she had lost all support from the Muslim community but her Jewish friend was the only one she felt she could talk to. Personal connection to pain resonates, communal pain creates connection.

Pain caused by politics have brought Muslim and Latinx communities together. Pain caused by hate crimes have brought LGBTQ and Muslims together. Pain caused by religious stereotypes have brought Muslims and Sikhs together. While there has been no shortage of

opportunities to grieve the loss of life and mourn in community, the Ramadan Iftar that was planned in response to the Pulse Nightclub shooting is one pivotal example brought up by multiple contributors. This event, as illustrated by Leila used mourning as an act of protest.²⁹⁷ It was an opportunity to bring the disparate LGBTQ and Muslim communities together and was a powerful example of what interfaith could do and be. While no one wants to experience the pain that brought these communities together, Johnny believes that these types of events should happen more. This event allowed participants to imagine what more frequent and consistent contact could look like.

Reflecting on the event, Johnny compared it to the experience of growing up in a home that “villainized Muslims.” The contrast of growing up in this space and then being in a room filled with people with different beliefs that were striving for solidarity was beautiful. Johnny was impressed that a room full of religious people would stand up with them. That is not to say that there are not religious members of the LGBTQ community, as well as LGBTQ Muslims.²⁹⁸ Speaking to Johnny, Leslie, and Leila caused me to reflect on this event as well. I was invited by one of the organizers to be a religious representative, along with many other leaders from the county. Feeling slightly underqualified next to Rabbis, Pastors, and Priests, I accepted the invitation to share a scripture. I assumed that leadership from my church would be unwilling to speak at a public event that supported the LGBTQ community. To my surprise there were at least two male LDS leaders in the audience. After the presentation, both thanked me for my words. In reflecting on this experience, I resonate with what Asma and Zaha have said about Muslim women finding more latitude in interfaith spaces because they do not necessarily have authority

²⁹⁷ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, 74.

²⁹⁸ [Rainbow Faith and Freedom](#) is one example of an organization that brings religious identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation together.

– institutional or otherwise – within their own tradition, but in interfaith spaces the lack of authority doesn't matter, and in some cases may be an asset because there is less repercussions for the positions they take. Unlike the leaders of which Ida speaks, who don't have the freedom to say and do whatever they like because they are representatives of their tradition. It is much easier for a female member of the Church to speak to social issues, than a called and set apart representative of the church that might be at risk of having their statements conflated as a position of the church.

In addition to the iftar, there was also a march to honor the lives lost in the Pulse tragedy. At the time Leila was wearing hijab, which caused quite a bit of backlash. She was called “liberal” and “crazy” by members of her Muslim community as well as evangelical Christians and was told that she should not be marching with the LGBTQ community. It seems that from Leila's experience, the hijab alone made her a representative of Islam. She reflects: “I cannot tell you how much crap I took for that.” But for Leila, it was an act of mourning – “How can I not go and mourn with them?” For the few years that she wore a head scarf, she was able to do a lot of good because she “was the girl who could go anywhere.” She was comfortable in multiple spaces but the way she was treated caused pain. It was not only that she experienced islamophobia in the world, but when she entered spaces, with the intent to build bridges and create allies with religious others, and specifically the LGBTQ community, members of her own Muslim community said: “who the hell are you?” It wasn't so much the ignorance of religious others that made it difficult to wear the head scarf – that is expected – but the judgements of her own Muslim community. “Here I was being judged and criticized because I dared to wear the hijab” while building community with those who some Muslims deemed sinners, at the same time being “judged by the racists out there who hate people wearing hijab, telling me to go back to my

county, chasing me down.” For Leila, her desire and determination to mourn with others, caused real personal pain.

Interfaith Ethic

The previous discussion of affect, resonance and connection leads us to acknowledge the existence of an interfaith ethic which is characterized by curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality.

Ethos: “practices by which we hold our faith and bear our identities”²⁹⁹

As an ethic, interfaith works within an individual and makes every space they enter an interfaith space, each with unique challenges and limitations. As contributors cultivate an interfaith ethic there are those “trigger moments” as Donna calls them, that bring awareness to diverse spaces and people. Recognizing these moments provides opportunity to develop a curiosity about others, respect their authentic religious practices and strive to be hospitable. Regardless of the religious or non-religious origins of development, each contributor exhibits an interfaith ethic characterized by curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality. While these concepts can be loaded, academically, they were chosen because of their explicit use by contributors.

Both Mariah and Johnny feel as if they “fell into interfaith,” But Nellie supposes, that “there has to be something about you to want to be in an interfaith environment.” In addition, Judith considers that there must be something about the space, or the people in the space, that makes you want to enter. However, I argue that many can attribute their interfaith ethic to their early relationships and experience prior to entering institutional interfaith spaces. For example, Judith shared: “My ordination papers talk about other religious traditions and inspiration from

²⁹⁹ Roberts, “Chapter 11,” 287.

them, so somewhere along the way I cared about that. I don't know where.” Growing up in a conservative Christian home and as a queer adult, Johnny shared that they were not exposed to religious diversity. Having rejected religion, interfaith seems to be so different from other spaces. Unlike Johnny, others attribute their interfaith ethic to the examples of their parents. Betty’s quiet, humble, and polite parents might have stopped going to church, Betty grew up in an “atmosphere” where her parents were always “helping people get better, to have something better.” Mariah’s Egyptian mother had Coptic friends, Esther’s non-religious Iranian parents had friends from various traditions, and Donna’s conservative Jewish parents worked in public schools and prisons. Dorothy’s Irish Catholic parents “welcomed everyone” and taught her to “always have an open door,” and “always have an extra cup of soup.” Although Rosalie’s mother was “very suspicious of the Christian world,” her father instilled in her what she calls an “integrated universalist” perspective. Elsie’s agnostic father taught her ethics through history and Aisha’s mother taught her to love and question her tradition. Martha’s conservative Mormon parents taught her that “our hearts have space for other people.” Though she grew up in a “rough” part of Los Angeles that was “overrun with gangs,” Martha witnessed her parent’s inclusive values and heart for service.

My dad was the guy you went to if you wanted your bike or your little boombox radio fixed. My dad could fix anything, and my mom sat around the dining room table with so many kids from our community, helping with homework, making sure they had bologna sandwiches.

Regardless of one’s ‘home tradition,’ Miriam believes that everyone who enters an interfaith space is pulling from their “deepest value system.” Similarly, Kunti believes that they are motivated by the “core tenants” found in all religions which are “to be a good person, serve, show compassion, be kind,” and basically “not be an asshole.” Hence, those who enter interfaith spaces do so in order to build solidarities through “mutual commitments” to these values, rather

than “homogeneity or sameness.”³⁰⁰ According to Bednarowski, women are often less concerned with “defending their traditions” and more concerned with “trying to figure out how best to articulate and contribute their deepest meanings in conversation with women of different communities.”³⁰¹ This is one reason why women might gravitate to interfaith space. Thus, Asma believes it is more effective to build interfaith communities with those that are “already captivated” rather than trying to “recruit new people.” In other words, those who already exhibit the characteristics of an interfaith ethic: curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality.

Curiosity

As a child Zaha accompanied her father, an Ambassador for Syria to Europe and India, on work trips around the world. It was in these spaces where she was “exposed to different faith groups and people” and where she began to ask questions about the faith of others. From Mary’s first experiences of hearing the music of the Baptist churches growing up in Jamaica to visiting Cathedrals in Europe, and Israel during Ramadan, each encounter with religious others fostered curiosity. Cragg offers a beautiful depiction of curiosity and its impact:

To teach trust is to teach to question. To question is to doubt without falling into despair. Knowing embraces not knowing and learning involves unlearning.³⁰²

The Bahai tradition teaches Zhang the importance of challenging assumptions, to be critical of perspectives and doctrines, and be open to exploration and investigation. In other words, to be curious. The Zoroastrian tradition, according to Amyra’s interpretation, encourages her to always be challenging her beliefs, pushing her to seek more information, and “to continuously be open to new thoughts and new ideas” that are “righteous and morally good.” In

³⁰⁰ May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 4.

³⁰¹ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 187.

³⁰² Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

other words, to be curious. Unfortunately, the privilege associated with being part of the dominant (Christian) culture, often hinders this curiosity at best, and motivates violence at worst. Rabbi Hirschfield's observation that "faith becomes the ground from which we lash out, from which we justify that which we already believe, rather than the place inside ourselves from which we find the strength to become seekers and open ourselves to new people and new ideas"³⁰³ finds hope in interfaith spaces.

In order to do this, there has to be a willingness to be affected. A willingness to be uncomfortable. While the desire or intention to change others should never be the goal of interfaith engagement. A willingness to be affected by interfaith encounters does lead one to say, as Asma imagines: "I'm entering this conversation as [me], I don't know who I'm going to be by the end." While the outcome of each interfaith encounter is unknown, for Helen, she can confidently say: "I'm not who I was thanks to interfaith, I think, I hope I'm a better person. I have had the honor of sharing friendships, of breaking bread, of praying with all these fabulous people from all over the world." Curiosity did that.

There is a spectrum of curiosity. It is important to note that not everyone, as a result of engagements with religious diversity become curious, nor does everyone engage with religious diversity because they are curious. In fact, both Fatima and Asma reason that those in dominant position are least likely to become curious because they "don't feel like they need to be understood," but even more damning, they don't feel that they need to understand others. Being on the receiving end of this logic, Amyra has spent most of her life feeling that no one was curious about her Zoroastrian tradition. Often when someone asked Amyra about her religion she

³⁰³ Brad Hirschfield, *You Don't Have to be Wrong for me to be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 63.

would say: “I practice something else,” something other than an Abrahamic faith. Whereas Emma, a humanist raised Catholic, has cultivated an interfaith ethic, that motivates her to “complicate the story” and become curious about the “something else” that others practice.

Those who utilize an interfaith ethic look for opportunities to create interfaith encounters for those who have not yet developed an interfaith ethic. For example, both Eliza (Mormon) and Martha (Mormon) have had members of their congregations share their concern for the interfaith work they do. The anxiety typically comes along with questions about their commitment to the faith, fear that they will leave The Church, and confusion about why one would need to engage with people of different faiths. Eliza has tried to make herself, and her Mormon community, available when there is an opportunity to serve and engage with religious others. When a fellow member of the interfaith council lost his son, Eliza offered an LDS building that was across the street to be used for the lunch after the funeral service. When this same man lost his mother, Eliza volunteered to have her Mormon community come and set up tables and chairs. These interfaith opportunities are not accepted without some pushback. When another member of a local interfaith council past away, Eliza offered the services of the Mormon community again. Assigning the various congregations to deliver a total of 140 dozen cookies to the Catholic church, her strategy to encourage interfaith encounters was to require that each person who was donating cookies had to deliver them to the church on their own. “I had so many great stories of women that said, I had never been over there. They were so happy and it was so nice.”

It is Betty’s opinion many of the world’s problems can be attributed to “a real lack of curiosity about other people,” as well as an unwillingness to be uncomfortable. For some, the fact that interfaith has become a space where the same people come together has become a reason for disengagement. The fact that interfaith has become so familiar and so comfortable is

problematic for some. Feeling a bit pessimistic, Leslie sees the same people at meetings and events, leading them to believe that “if a person hasn’t made any effort, thus far, to educate themselves or ask questions or befriend someone of another faith, then they’re probably not going to.” To which Gloria adds: “People who do not believe in interfaith, do not participate in interfaith.... The fact that people are showing up to interfaith, means that they believe there is stuff to learn from other faith traditions” and possibly about their own. When expressing their desires and motivations for participating in interfaith spaces, contributors to this project shared the following:

I’m just curious - Esther

I come with great curiosity and enthusiasm, understanding that I live in a diverse community. I want to expand my lens and understand who the people are that I live with, who my neighbors are, and just be a good neighbor, a good partner, and somebody who is just immersed in the totality of the community. – Donna

Through my patient interactions I started becoming really curious about other people... Pain is pain. It doesn't matter whether you're Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. – Asma

I’m always really curious about other religions... because it informs how people live their lives. How they’re walking around the world every day... I think there is value in trying to understand people who think differently than I do. – Amy

I have always had a deep love for, and curiosity about, other people’s faith journeys - Fatima

If you are willing to be involved in interfaith, it's because you're interested, you're either interested in other faiths... or you're open [and] feel secure enough in your own faith that you don't feel threatened. – Gloria

The more different someone is from me, the more I have to learn from them – Betty

Always be questioning – Amyra

Ask questions out of curiosity, but don’t let the answers to those questions keep you from loving your neighbor – Amy

In *See No Stranger*, Kaur suggests that “wondering about others helps us to wonder about ourselves.”³⁰⁴ For example, in the aftermath of 9/11 Rachel found herself wanting to know more about and understand Islam – “I felt it would inform my own Jewishness.” Being curious allows us to resonate with religious others. Being willing to “look at images or read about people different from oneself... opens up the possibility that positive curiosity will be awakened and lead to positive contact.”³⁰⁵ This positive contact is what Mary experienced when she chose to fast for Ramadan or hike the El Camino trail, there were some that questioned her purpose, but for her the experiences helped her to “internalize ideas of connection.”

A Note on Proselytization

It is important to remember that curiosity might have killed the cat, but for interfaith participants, it did not cause conversion. Though proselytization is a concern in any interfaith space, I argue that exercising an interfaith ethic is antithetical to a desire to proselytize. In fact, in most cases interfaith participation reduces the desire to proselytize.³⁰⁶ This does not mean that proselytization isn't still a concern. Attending an event where Eboo Patel spoke, Patricia understood a portion of the presentation to assert that in interfaith, participants have a “secret desire” to convert their friends. Assuming that we still respect the faith of each other, but because our religion means so much to us, deep in our hearts we still hope or believe that “you’ll come to my faith.” Patricia clarifies that people don’t overtly proselytize but considers that they might have a desire, because they believe it so deeply. In 2019 I also attended an interfaith conference, at which Eboo Patel was the moderator. A Catholic speaker told the audience that she believes if people aren’t trying to convert her it means one of two things, either they don’t love their faith

³⁰⁴ Kaur, Valarie, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, 27.

³⁰⁵ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 57.

³⁰⁶ Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 97.

enough to share it, or they don't love her enough to share something of importance – in other words – proselytize.

While freedom of religion allows for the expression of faith, it does not grant an “unequivocal right to proselytize under any and all circumstance.”³⁰⁷ What interfaith provides, ideally, is an opportunity for friends to explore “God’s truth in the safe space of admiration, openness, trust, [and] vulnerability”³⁰⁸ without the threat of proselytization. This is a difficult prospect for those who come from traditions that prioritize proselytization. However, it has been Deborah’s (Jewish) experience that most enter interfaith spaces not to proselytize, but to be part of community, with a desire to know more about the beliefs and practices of others. And for those that do struggle with a desire to proselytize, Elif (Muslim) offers grace, acknowledging that “it’s hard to take those [proselytizing] lenses off.” Wuthnow suggests that one of the ways to begin to take those “lenses” off is to have religious leaders “teaching their faithful about the theologies and the beliefs of neighbors.”³⁰⁹ But this is easier said than done. Deborah believes that “it takes a very courageous religious leader to encourage their congregations to go out and learn, not necessarily proselytize.”

One of the well-known features of Mormonism is its robust missionary program. As a Mormon, this causes me abundant stress in interfaith spaces, and yet it is something that many of the non-Mormon contributors are impressed by. Many speak of their admiration for the young adults who commit 18-24 months to such a commendable endeavor. Understanding the motivations of missionaries, Fatima (Muslim) shares her perspective: “When you are knocking on somebody’s door, your agenda is front and center.” However, when two people are coming to

³⁰⁷ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What’s the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 234.

³⁰⁸ Ahiokhai, “Locating the Place of Interreligious Friendship in Comparative Theology,” 149.

³⁰⁹ Bender and Kassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, 9.

an interfaith space with two different motivations, agendas are concealed. While many recognize that being a missionary has the explicit purpose of conversion, it is hard for many Mormons to take off the missionary badge (metaphorically) when they enter interfaith spaces.

Evidence of this struggle is presented by Mormon contributors to this project. Though the Mormon church provides trainings that described the interfaith ‘job’ as separate from missionary work, one Mormon contributor shared that there have been multiple occurrences when she “wanted to share more” with others, but “respected all that they knew that was good.” Choosing to respect, rather than ‘share more’ leads me to consider a possible subconscious motivation to ‘share more’ as a manifestation of a lack of respect. For example, Robert Putnam cites “a conservative Christian woman who says of the Jewish friend whom she believes to be damned, “I respect her and what she believes.”³¹⁰ In other words, if one genuinely respects, would there be a ‘want’ to ‘share more’ that must be constrained? Or is the desire to ‘share more’ tempered by social constraints to be seen as respectful, rather than actually respecting others?

There was a small gathering of interfaith leaders from Muslim, Jewish, and Catholic traditions, in a Mormon home. The express purpose of this meeting was to convince these leaders that Mormons are in fact Christian and should be considered as Christian representatives in an interfaith program. In reflecting on this experience, the Mormon contributor praised her husband for sharing the “missionary lessons in 20 minutes.” Afterwards she recalls a positive reception and an engaging discussion. She then said: “If only we had another 20 minutes, you know?” She quickly clarified that she was “not trying to really change anybody's lifestyle or anything” but just wanted to encourage a new perspective. I chose not to probe this story, but as a Mormon, who has served a mission, there was something that I think she hoped would

³¹⁰ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 11.

resonate, based on her confirmation question: “You know?” I do know. I know that deep down many Mormons really do want to offer their ‘truth’ and do hope that it will be accepted.

Another Mormon participant shared, aware of the proselytization motivation, that her husband is “totally supportive” of her interfaith endeavors but “struggles at some of the interfaith events” because of his commitment to the ‘truth’. At the same time that she reminds him that interfaith is not a place to “convert” but to love and “build friendships,” she comments that one of her friends “would make the best Latter-day Saint.” Recognizing that these sentiments are not unique to Mormons – I have been told that I would make a good Jew or Muslim, on multiple occasions – it does highlight the unspoken tension that proselytization brings to interfaith spaces.

A tension that Abigail is very aware of as she facilitates a weekly interfaith meetings at the college’s interfaith center. These meetings give students an opportunity to share “their faith tradition, their club, a poem, or a scripture, it is really open ended.” However, Abigail admits that at times she gets a little “nervous” when the language of ‘testimony’ is used. Having grown up Catholic and having done “a stint” in an evangelical church she wants to “respect the [interfaith] space” by letting everyone know “that we do not have to take this [testimony] down the road any further, because the rest of this road is accepting Jesus.” To be clear, the rest of the road is inviting other so accept Jesus.

While in Israel on an explicitly non-proselytizing mission in Israel in the late 90’s, another Mormon contributor shared the experience of being in a location in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims all deem sacred. In this interfaith space, the Israeli government has explicit restrictions on proselytizing efforts. The restrictions potentially make interfaith experiences more affective. With proselytization off the table, experiences and engagements become more open and penetrating. Visiting different synagogues, having dinner in the homes of

Palestinians, and participating in Passover and Ramadan celebrations, were void of overt proselytization efforts. But for this devoted Mormon that does not mean that the internal, if subconscious, desire to proselytize is absent. She sees interfaith work as hand in hand with missionary work. Offering her overt objective, interfaith work is the method employed to “help others know that they are sons and daughters of God, and we are brothers and sisters” she continues: “even though I am not proselytizing... Somebody is bound to be curious and investigate.” Recognizing that:

Ultimately, it's up to that person to decide whether or not they want to [convert]... [interfaith has] made it easier for me to become friends, because I don't have that weight: “When can I ask them *the* questions.” I wait for them to come to us with the questions. And I find that very freeing.

What is ‘the’ questions she no longer feels pressure to ask? It could be: ‘When can I ask them to meet with the missionaries?’ ‘When can I ask them to receive a Book of Mormon?’ ‘When can I ask them to come to church with me?’ ‘When can I ask them if they want to get baptized?’ While, to my knowledge none of the Mormon contributors to this project have crossed the proselytization line of asking these questions in an interfaith space, there is an apparent struggle with it.

Bringing up proselytization to non-Mormon contributors most reported never feeling targeted. “Never did I feel like they’re trying to preach to me or convert me” (Aisha). I am not sure that these responses were a result of unfamiliarity with the language of proselytization and methods that Mormons use, or if they were attempting to project a positive view of the faith that they know I practice. In other words, did my relationship to the Mormon faith alongside my relationship with them, somehow minimize the experiences and critiques that they might have otherwise recognized as inconsistent with an interfaith space or ethic?

I recognize that some might feel that this examination of Mormons, proselytizing, and interfaith work is a bit critical, and potentially overstated. Some might dismiss these examples as human foibles and argue that similar statements and motivations can be found in any religion. I do not disagree. Mormons are not the only ones who straddle the line between a commitment to faith that at times manifests in a desire to share beliefs for the purpose of conversion rather than presenting information of interest. For example, Mariah shares that while she refuses “in and out” any interpretation of Islam that considers infidels, those who are not Muslim, she knows that there are Muslims in interfaith that believe this. “They love their relationships, they love people from other faiths, but they still genuinely believe that others are infidels.” Much like the non-Mormons that were not aware of the possible ulterior motives that I have noticed, as a non-Muslim I was not aware of this belief amongst Muslim interfaith participants. This realization brings attention to the subtext that exists in any relationship. The insider language, interpretations, and understandings that may not be visible to outsiders. Since an interfaith space is replete with outsiders, with others, it is no surprise that on the surface, everything seems harmonious.

Aware of what is appropriate and what is not in institutional interfaith settings, individuals who participate make subtle statements that might only be recognizable, or triggering, to those who are attune to potential concealed motives, are quickly dismissed. However, once we leave the institutional interfaith space, the line of protection against proselytization becomes obscured.

A Christian-Muslim dialogue program, which Fatima was a founding participant, was an institutional interfaith project built on an organic relationship model. Christian and Muslim participants, through invitation or self-selection, entered each other’s homes to share a meal and

have conversations. Homes became an interfaith space, as they are potentially less threatening than houses of worship and more inviting than government buildings.

Fatima has since left the program and distanced herself from interfaith efforts in general because of her discovery of ulterior motives. In a letter, officially leaving the program, Fatima expressed her concerns and disappointments.

I providentially stumbled upon a few websites by Evangelical Christians writing about a technique to bring Muslims into “the Kingdom of God.” These techniques teach other Evangelicals how to share Jesus with Muslims by first loving Muslims, befriending them, learning about their religion, and using that knowledge and language to bring them to the Bible and to “follow” Jesus in the way Christians understand it (i.e. accepting Jesus as “Lord and Savior”).

What immediately struck me about these websites was the use of the Kingdom of God circle drawings, which will immediately look familiar to anybody who has attended a training or seminar by [the program], the goal is to draw “interested” Muslims (referred to as “people of peace,” which will also sound familiar from the trainings) toward the Bible and accepting Jesus as their savior... This technique, called “discipleship” instead of “evangelism” so as to distract from the concept of conversion.

I sincerely believed that the initiative was purely about making friends and dispelling misinformation about each other’s community. This technique does a good job removing all the typical “red flag” words to convince Muslims that this Kingdom conversation is not about conversion or evangelism. Despite many instances when I -- as well as other Muslim participants -- felt like something was going on beyond friendship-building, we could not point to anything tangible; that is, until this week. As of today, I have formally removed myself from the project. I no longer endorse this project, nor am I affiliated with it any longer.

God commands us to pardon and forgive, to which I submit wholeheartedly. I will continue with compassion and courtesy and never with disrespect or hate in any communication with [the program] Christians. I am at peace with my decision.

Bringing this issue to light, I feel, is the first step in rectifying the situation and helping move toward justice/reconciliation. I also sincerely seek your forgiveness and ask God for His guidance and to grant me wisdom to learn from this spiritually abusive experience. Ameen.

Offering a compassionate yet complicated analysis, Fatima acknowledged that her relationship to interfaith spaces have not necessarily been “defined by proselytizing,” but have been damaged. At the same time, regardless of the motivations that bring someone into an

interfaith space, the opportunity for the experience to change that motivation always exists. For instance, Fatima suggests that it is possible for someone to “enter into an interfaith space with an agenda to convert somebody” but through the experience have their hearts softened. So then, Fatima asks, “is that a bad thing?” In other words, is it okay to have an ulterior motive bring you to an interfaith space, if it means that in the process of interfaith engagement you abandon that motivation? Her response: “It's really complicated.” As a chaplain, who is seen as a leader in her community, she has “an ethical responsibility” to make sure interfaith is a safe space with “pure [and] transparent” intentions, which she has found difficult to do.

Authenticity

Individuals who exercise an interfaith ethic strive to engage with the full humanity of religious others in multiple spaces. Exercising an interfaith ethic recognizes, acknowledges, and respects all the ways in which one practices religion beyond stereotypes and regardless of the space. In other words, the authenticity of others and self. Authenticity is not about natural or cultural essentialism, what contributors see as authentic is a religious practice that is individual and original to them. Authenticity is conceptualized as an individual's originality in interpreting doctrine as well as honest, genuine, and sometimes unique ways of practicing one's religious tradition.

Rachel runs a Jewish-Muslim dialogue program that takes a “very heterogeneous Jewish cohort and a very heterogeneous Muslim cohort” in order to emphasize that “every person speaks for themselves and not for the entire tradition.” The program brings to the surface the importance and often unacknowledged challenges of intra-faith work in addition to interfaith work. Chapter four will focus more on the ways in which interfaith participants live their religion, but here I highlight how doing inter- and intra-faith work simultaneously impacts relationships within

one's own religious community as well as the relationships one has with religious others. For example, Elif was asked to speak at a Shia Mosque on a specific topic. Having been raised in an intra-faith home she decided to prepare a presentation that focused on intra-faith engagement. When she was done the Imam stood and repudiated what she had said. This was a moment where Elif had a clear understanding that "religion divides." It was a moment when her authenticity was invalidated by a religious leader. This brings attention to the pushback that those who exercise an interfaith ethic get from religious communities that try to stifle religious authenticity.

Elif recognizes that "belonging to people and a group that are similar" in religious beliefs and practices is a great foundation. But at times the price to be paid is authenticity. It has been Elif's experience that the moment you start to question the tradition, or more accurately, the culture of the tradition, there are consequences to your membership in the group and acceptance by that community. Elif made the decision that "if I'm not allowed to explore [God] here... I will continue on my journey and go and seek God everywhere" including interfaith spaces. "I knew that I was a little too colorful for your standard walk-into-a-mosque-and-be-a-good-follower" at a young age, Elif started questioning, analyzing, and exploring God. By the time she was in high school, she was beginning to realize that seeing the world as "black or white stops creativity" and "stunts your creativity when it comes to God and your heart." She wanted to see and believe in God in more authentic ways.

An interfaith ethic acknowledges that religious others can be fully religious/spiritual/faithful and committed, while also being critical of their home tradition. An interfaith space allows both to exist. Participants are critical without criticizing. They hold their traditions to a high standard. Most acknowledge failures. Some participate in apologetics. And they often commiserate with each other about the challenges of culture in their traditions.

Whether one does or does not wear a head scarf, regardless of tattoos and sexual orientation, regardless of dietary practices, or choices of activities on holy-days and holidays, authenticity rejects the use of “generalized and monolithic descriptions” of religious others and requires us “to know much better the different groups and factions... their daily practices, local histories, and religious and political ideologies.”³¹¹ Being in an interfaith space is different than walking into a house of worship, which in no uncertain terms assumes that “you will fit inside a mold” but in exercising an interfaith ethic we appreciate that we are more than a box.

Assuming that those who are involved in interfaith are curious about the traditions and practices of others they are open to experiencing authenticity of practice. When Betty enters new spaces, she often wonders about the individuals setting up the space, the people in the back, and the kids wondering around. Being aware of “the regular life going on” allows her to appreciate what she assumes are authentic practices. This observation of authenticity is exhilarating for those who hold an interfaith ethic. However, religious spaces are not always spaces of religious authenticity. Many in this project understand that “church is too often the most risky place to be spiritually honest.”³¹² It is in interfaith spaces that Olivia, Jane, and others feel the freedom to be authentic. Therefore, an interfaith ethic promotes authenticity for self and others, inhibiting any attempt to bound religion. For Jane, authenticity looks and feels like freedom. Interfaith is: “the freedom to be who I am, of just being open. It gives me a sense of hope. Because we freely express ourselves without judgment, knowing that we're trying to create a better place for others.” In fact, it is Nellie’s (Indigenous and Catholic) perspective that “if you are truly in interfaith you would never say to someone ‘you can’t believe that.’” For some contributors whose

³¹¹ Kwok Pui Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 97.

³¹² Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our*

racial identities, political or social leanings, or theological interpretations place them on the fringe of their own tradition, interfaith is the space that they feel free to be who they are and believe what they believe, without the dogmatic pressures of tradition.

Since most contributors are not religious leaders, and those that are understand there are diverse ways of interpreting and practicing religion, an interfaith ethic allows individual interpretations and practices, rather than representative or doctrinal beliefs. Olivia offers the following example:

When I started to learn about Filipino core values one of the words that came up was kapwa, K A P W A. Kapwa is looking at and seeing the innate humanity in each other, which is a universal call in many religions. We say: 'love your neighbor as you love yourself because your neighbor is yourself.' So, when I finally took what Jesus said, and stripped away all of the dogma that Christianity has put on Jesus. And I took the Filipino core values of helping each other, being compassionate, and being there for each other. I was finally able to put the two together. And it finally felt authentic. So, going forward, doing interfaith work is part of what I'm called to do.

The ethic of authentically allows Olivia to live the values that she connects with from her Christian faith and her Filipino culture. Similarly, Naima came to interfaith as a recent convert to Christianity while holding her Buddhist identity as a connection to her Asian culture. While Naima was able to combine her Buddhist culture with her Christian faith. It wasn't until Harriet was nearly thirty that her conservative Christian family, was willing to reconnect with their Buddhist roots. Harriet believes that it was the passing of her Buddhist grandmother that softened hearts and moved Harriet's Christian father to participate in the Buddhist funeral rituals. In high school Joan discovered eastern contemplative practices that helped her anxiety in ways that her Catholic tradition didn't. As she did more research she found the contemplative tradition within Catholicism, which brought her back to her 'home tradition.' These are not moments of

compromise, but of humanity. These are examples of organic interfaith and living out an interfaith ethic.

When preparing for this project I received feedback from a professor that suggested that people who do interfaith aren't "really religious." Though my initial reaction was to push back, I have come to accept that many contributors – by their own admission or based on traditional academic conceptualizations of 'religious' – are not orthodox. And yet, at times, institutional interfaith and state definitions of religion impose orthodox expressions that do not allow for religious authenticity in interfaith spaces.³¹³ Complaining that orthodox members of faith traditions are missing from interfaith spaces, interfaith participants are still limited by the institutional spaces that expect, if not orthodox, a traditional presentation of religion. For example, Ida (Presbyterian) concedes that she "was never a really strict doctrine person in terms of theology." So, if the measure of 'really religious' is equated to orthodoxy, then this professor was correct, people who do interfaith are often not orthodox, but are "really" – actually – religious by their own definitions of belief and practice.

In fact, from Martha's (Mormon) perspective, "interfaith is full of deeply religious people who have a greater understanding of what is needed in our world." Similar to the "free thinking and non-conformist behavior" that hooks saw being "encouraged in the backwoods,"³¹⁴ I wonder if the curiosity and authenticity that is encouraged in interfaith – thirdspace – is also "a threat to imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy?"³¹⁵ If by delegitimizing interfaith participants as not "really religious" the space, perspectives, and contributions are easier to reject?

³¹³ Ammerman, "The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity," 161.

³¹⁴ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 20.

³¹⁵ hooks, 20.

What then is the difference between being ‘really religious’ and having a religious identity? What does it mean to practice a religious tradition, or live a religious tradition, as compared to claiming a religious identity? Does one precede the other? Does one require the other? Can one hold a religious identity without being ‘really religious’? It is Linda’s (Muslim) opinion that there is a difference between those who are actively practicing their tradition and those who claim to be religious. She knows who is “really religious” not through an observation of orthopraxy, or an understanding of orthodoxy, but a *feeling* of being “on the same brainwave as the people who are practicing.” For example, When Francis (New Thought) and I first met in 2018, we were on a panel together at the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Francis remembers thinking: “I love what this person is talking about. She's Mormon and she's from Southern California. I'm excited.” I am grateful that after acknowledging my connection to Mormonism, she continued to share her complicated feelings, experiences, and honest critiques.³¹⁶ Then in 2015 The Parliament of the World’s Religions was held in Salt Lake City, Utah. Having an international interfaith event in a predominantly Mormon State was a shock to many because Francis is not alone in her negative assumptions about the LDS church. Francis decided to give Mormonism another chance.

I went to talks and I broke bread with Mormons. I went to breakout sessions with Mormons from the LGBT community. I went to breakout sessions with strong Mormon women who said: “we need to shake this up”, and I was just blown away. And all of a sudden, the fear I held on to dissolved. Whatever disconnect I was hanging on to was no more.

Francis listened to them say: “I love my faith tradition, but that doesn't mean that I accept everything.” This is when she realized the diversity of LDS experiences, the diversity that exists in all traditions. Because of interfaith both Francis and Leslie came to the realization that, as

³¹⁶ Francis spoke of the lifting of the priesthood ban in 1978 that allowed men of color to hold the priesthood, as well as the concerted effort by the Mormon church to support Prop 8 in 2008.

Leslie explains: “the purpose of interfaith is to not judge people solely by their faith,” but as “you meet people from various faiths and you realize that not everyone is the same, even within a faith.” Authenticity then, is not a returning to an original practice, but an originality of practice that is unique to each practitioner.

Hospitality

The last characteristic of an interfaith ethic that I will discuss is hospitality. Hospitality is a willingness to invite others into your space and a willingness to enter an-other space in order to build community. An interfaith ethic expands our understanding of hospitality to a reciprocal effort. The components of hospitality, namely a space of reception and a relationship between guest and host, are affectually amplified beyond a transaction. Hospitality requires us to be in a space, as Madeline contends, be “in the room”. When we are in our own space, hospitality is exhibited when we “invite people in.” An interfaith ethic expands hospitality, as Madeline describes, to also go “when you’re invited” and maybe even go “when you’re not invited.” An interfaith ethic motivates hospitality by both host and guest. And, at the end of the day, interfaith hospitality requires, according to Fatima, “sincere and religiously humble individuals to make an interfaith gathering something that is meaningful to everyone and inclusive.” Dorothy and Betty offer the ultimate examples of hospitality when they left their homes to serve in refugee camps. Dorothy in Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong and the Philippines in the 70’s and 80’s. Betty in Malawi and Pakistan in the 90’s. In these spaces they were exposed to people of different faiths, and observed how faith comforted those in the harshest of conditions. Being willing to take hospitality to those who have materially suffered is an interfaith ethic in action.

While much of this project focuses on institutional interfaith, intentional interfaith is a manifestation of hospitality. As religious communities open their houses of worship and invite

religious other in, organic interfaith might have the greatest impact. Being the only Muslim family of South Asian descent in a small, predominately white, Christian, Midwestern town it became requisite for Shaheen's family to engage with those that were different. Shaheen recalls her parent's extending hospitality to all of her friends and their families, inviting them to their home for south Asian food, cultivating in Shaheen an interfaith ethic. Shaheen also became comfortable attending church with friends on Sundays and weekly Bible studies. Having spent time wrestling with the doctrines of Christianity, Olivia has learned to interpret Christianity in a way that has led her to "live into hospitality". A skill which Gross contends is "not just about big lectures and big events." According to Gross, women "see where hospitality is needed, and will work to make it happen."³¹⁷ This is echoed in Patricia's conviction that women are more willing to invite, "more willing to show up... more willing to be raw and vulnerable". Echoing this perception, Martha suggests that women are "happy being busy doing good things" and have "an innate quality" that motivates them to put their names on lists, "to show up early," and "stay late". Thus, Martha, like many of the other participants in this project make themselves available.³¹⁸ To be sure, as Madeline contends, this is not an innate characteristic, but a cultivated skill.

As one serves and comes in contact with community, Madeline explains, "you develop a memory of how to recognize what needs to be done, you become more discerning." This discernment is what is needed to do interfaith work effectively. Discernment requires a level of humility and an ability to listen to what is needed, rather than an arrogance of assumed understanding. Discernment is also needed to recognize who is not in the room,³¹⁹ to invite, and

³¹⁷ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What's the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*.

³¹⁸ Nicole

³¹⁹ Marcy

to make the necessary adjustments to account for potential dominance, and “shut up” and listen to those who are in the minority.³²⁰ Thus discernment and hospitality go hand in hand.

Working for the Christian inspired non-profit, Habitat for Humanity, as a Jewish person, Deborah is grateful that the organization doesn't always lead with “Christ centered” language. This is an act of hospitality in order to create a space that is not dominated by a single tradition. While some Christians are concerned that by not talking about Christ their perspective will somehow be “diluted,” Deborah encourages us to consider that interfaith is not so much about what we can and cannot talk about, “but rather how do we talk in a way that invites people.” In other words, what adjustments or accommodations can we make to make the space comfortable? More hospitable? What Betty hope's is that ‘white people’ (and Christians) can experience having a seat at a table without feeling like they ‘own’ the table. This suggestion would need to be implemented by individual communities, that feel comfortable enough to invite religious others into their space. Following this logic, someone (white Christians) feels uncomfortable in new spaces, they will become more aware of what it is to be othered, recognizing that discomfort will not last forever, but will probably never fully go away in interfaith spaces. The moment someone is willing to be uncomfortable, is the moment when learning can begin.

Abigail (wizzle) offers a few more examples of exercising an interfaith ethic of hospitality. When she was young, she worked for a department store. During Christmas time her manager charged her decorating the break room. She pushed back, arguing that her non-Christian co-workers are bombarded with Christmas trees and Christmas carols all day, they shouldn't be subject to that while on break. The awareness is a demonstration of an interfaith ethic of hospitality and while she didn't win the battle, her desire to shift the space is noted. Later, when

³²⁰ Sara

Abigail was searching for a wedding venue she toured various churches. Though she was no longer a practicing Catholic, the idea of being in that space was attached to feelings of home and comfort. Her sister, who had become a Jehovah Witness, shared that because of her faith she would not be able to attend the wedding if it was held in a Catholic church. Once again Abigail exhibited the interfaith ethic of hospitality, shifting the space of her wedding to one in which her sister would be comfortable. This does not mean that religious or non-religious people are expected to shift space for others comfort, but that the discernment to know what is needed to make others comfortable or maintain relationships is important.

Abigail's hospitality continued while working at an interfaith center. She discovered a Christian group was holding Bible study outside in the hot sun. She reached out to this group, offering a conference room in the interfaith center as a cool space to meet. Though they refused her invitation, Abigail was not deterred. She decided to show up to the patio, even though she was not invited. She ate her lunch near the group every Wednesday for an entire semester, but, she recalls: "They wanted no part of me." Similarly, Elif was disappointed, heartbroken in fact, that certain Christians were unwilling to come to an interfaith event she and Patricia had organized. Her lament: "I show up. I go to their church. I listen to them speak. I pray with them. My soul connects" but when she asked them to show up for an interfaith event that promoted "peace and love," they were not willing to be guests. Many in the Mormon community have complained to Sally: "we invite everybody to our events; they just don't want to come." Sally's response emphasizes the need for reciprocity in hospitality: "Go their direction first. When they invite you to come to something at a religious site, go and participate and listen... the road goes both ways." Reciprocity "is based on an assumption of equality and sameness between oneself

and another.”³²¹ She continues: “if you want them to come and be social with you, then you need to go and support and be social with them.” Which is exactly what Mariah does: “Here's another super vulnerable thing. I think I go to churches and temples and gurdwaras more than I go to mosques.”

As a Jewish person Rachel has fond memories of Christmas in her small east coast town. “We were guests. We were honored. There wasn't any expectation that we were supposed to participate. We were welcomed in with warmth and love. They were authentically sharing what was theirs with us.” This reflection helps us understand that hospitality finds full affect in authenticity. Another example of hospitality is when Mary's friend made arrangements for her to stay with members of their family in Morocco during Ramadan. The family did not speak English, and Mary did not speak Arabic, but when Mary arrived, she felt welcomed. They made sacrifices for her. The husband slept on the couch and Mary slept in the only room with the mother and daughter.

I just remember, I woke up at sunrise. They were both sleeping. The sun was coming through the window, and in that moment I felt so much love for this family... all the hate that I had ever heard about different cultures and religions was challenged in a way that was undeniable for me... my testimony [is that] God is with all of his people. And that we all have the capacity to love. That my religion has taught me how to love well but, religion for so many people has also taught them the same thing.

In this example hospitality is shown to be the antidote to misinformation and the manifestation of love. Carole, on the other hand, has adopted an if-you-invite-me-I-will-go approach to her interfaith encounters. Thus, in those cases where the invitation seems to be sincere, without an obvious ulterior motive, Betty suggests that if you invite someone to your house of worship, “you just hear them, you're not noticing context.” You remain comfortable

³²¹ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 126.

because you are on your ‘home turf’ and ‘they’ are just visiting. Being willing to go to someone else’s space requires one to exercise an interfaith ethic. It is “when people are out of their comfort zone,” Betty argues, that “the most impact happens.” When you invite someone to your space – your home or house of worship – if the motivation is to stay in your comfort zone, then you are not creating an interfaith space, you are creating a power imbalance.

Betty shares a “vivid memory” of visiting the houses of worship as part of a world religions class in college.

I will never forget going to the Krishna Center in West LA. The smell and the incense. It's really different. The people in my class chose to take a religious class, but we're like, ‘oh, this is weird.’ It was a Christian school, so they were freaked out by the statues. There was a service going on, so we were all sitting cross legged on the floor with a bunch of other people and I just went with it. They started chanting, Hare Krishna Hare Rama. And I was like, I'm just going to get into this too. I'm just going to chant it, shut my eyes, and I remember doing it, [then] opening my eyes and everyone in my group was just staring at me like ‘what a heathen,’ and I thought, ‘God, I’m just trying it on.’ I didn't know anything about it, I just wanted to see what they were feeling.... I remember it being taboo... that's not okay to treat people like they're not worth knowing, or they're wrong before you even know them.

Betty’s act of hospitality was to enter another’s space with curiosity, understanding what Bidwell has discovered, that God – or Mystery – is not offended when we ‘try something on.’ What Betty realized was that to really start a relationship with an-other, you must be willing to go to them, enter their space and be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Because of interfaith Elif has prayed with her Christian friends, meditated with her Buddhist friends, and attended a synagogue with her Jewish friends. When we are willing to enter someone else’s space, we begin to know them in context, not as extracted objects but as fully human.

In those cases when you invite others into your space, hospitality is not only inviting others into your home, but also allowing others to have an impact on your home. In preparing for an interfaith trip to Egypt, Jordan, and Israel in 2018, as one of the trip leaders Mariah (Muslim)

invited the group to her home to share in a potluck meal. It also happened to be Hanukkah and the Rabbi asked if he could offer a prayer and light the menorah.

Acknowledging humanity motivates hospitality and a commitment to hospitality complicates, in every good way, our interactions with the other. Donna vividly remembers her father inviting an Egyptian-Muslim coworker to their home to share in the Passover Seder. Reflecting on this experience, “I don’t know if I even understood what a Muslim was” but “I remember thinking I wonder if he feels uncomfortable because we're in this very Jewish environment and we’re celebrating our victory over the Egyptians, and he's Egyptian, I wonder what it feels like to be in his shoes right?” In this reflection Donna demonstrates her interfaith ethic manifested in her curiosity and concern for the other. Wondering if her experience and identity as a Jew, somehow conflicted with what this man was feeling as a guest in her home, she continued her reflection: “You know I often think about that experience and think about what it's like to be in somebody else's shoes in a particular environment and how do we welcome people into our homes, and for different faiths, how do we become aware of all of the sensitivities?” Donna’s reflection is an illustration of interfaith socialization and the cultivation of curiosity.

I would say 60-70% of the people that were going on the trip were Jewish, and they all started chanting in Hebrew, I was scared. I never told them, but I was scared. And then all of a sudden, I started to say [to myself], “Okay, I believe in [interfaith], that's what I've been preaching, so why am I scared?” And then I was proud that I actually broke that. A lot of these things, you're breaking what's inside you. And then after that you actually do become a better person. Your communication skills are better, you represent yourself in a better way. And then you also teach your kids a lesson. But what if somebody lights a menorah in your home and what if somebody chants? Nothing happened, I'm still the same person.

As Mariah continued to analyze this experience, she was able to pinpoint a foundational piece of the fear she was experiencing. Growing up, anything that was associated with Israel, especially the rabbis praying in Hebrew. The Egyptian media would often portray Jews, Israel,

and Hebrew as being anti-Arab, anti-Egyptian, and anti-Muslim. Mariah understands now that it was political brainwashing, and she is grateful that her “kids are growing up with a different narrative.” There is no denying that she had a physical reaction when she heard Hebrew in her home. It was an affectual response of fear but her dedication to interfaith motivated her to lean into discomfort and extend hospitality. Though she was able deconstruct her feelings, there was still a visceral reaction to an interfaith experience that was not comfortable. But, she “got over it” and that made her proud, not just for herself but her kids got to see a “model of acceptance,” that “we allowed them to celebrate in our home.” Her home became an intentional interfaith space. Admittedly, Mariah cannot be sure of the agenda that might have been motivating the Rabbi’s request to offer a prayer. But in interfaith spaces, guided by an interfaith ethic, most participants hope for the best of intentions and offer others the benefit of the doubt.

Both Rachel and Kala emphasize that it is not enough to just invite or show up, but we have to do so in the right way, “a good way.”³²² Those who are “good guests,” are those who cultivate an interfaith ethic. Linda offers a beautiful example of this. Soon after she arrived at her masjid to begin setting up for an interfaith event two people, who were “obviously not Muslim” showed up. Linda greeted them in the lobby and explained that they were early but were welcome to have a seat. As Linda recounted this experience tears filled her eyes as she remembers the couple saying, “Can we set up the chairs?” At first Linda pushed back: “No, you are our guests, you don’t have to do that.” But, they insisted: “this is what interfaith is all about, we help each other and we’re so excited to be here.” In reflecting on this experience, Linda was “blown away by their willingness” and is still impressed by their example. She explains: “they were coming to a strange place... and maybe they’re really involved... but they came in and

³²² Tina

started rolling up their sleeves... they were so humble and so nice.” During their exchanges, Linda discovered that this couple was Jewish, which added another level of significance because, as Linda reflects, “when you think about the grand scheme of how Muslims and Jews work together” or don’t, this couple embodied interfaith, by practicing the interfaith ethic of hospitality.

Betty advocates for us to leave our own spaces and enter an-others. Adding justification to this recommendation, Lugones suggests that “knowing other women’s “worlds” is part of knowing them and knowing them is part of loving them.” Recognizing that “traveling to another’s “world” is not the same as becoming intimate with them,”³²³ Emma believes that:

to truly engage and be authentically inclusive, we need to be talking to people unlike ourselves. And if we do that, if we center these voices, our institutions and our cultures will also be shifted. I assume for the better, I don't know, but I assume that with greater diversity and greater openness and listening to a variety of perspectives that this will benefit us.

While diversity itself does not result in “greater openness” and in some cases results in conflict, exercising an interfaith ethic in of curiosity, that allows for authenticity, may result in more hospitality. Remembering that Sally and Abigail have experienced hospitality that is not always reciprocated, Elif suggestion of “just walk in and learn who they are,” might not lead to a positive outcome. However, holding an interfaith ethic that encourages curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality is bound to have a positive affect on the individual. They will be more open, they will be more willing to listen, when the religious other is willing to open their space and talk.

³²³ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, 65.

Chapter 4 Lived Religion

Religion may be a social construct, but it is not one that we chose. According to Ida (Presbyterian), we are given “a construct from generations of family, from community” and though we can reject the premise, the values and teachings are steeped in our identities. It is Savitri’s (Hindu) perspective that “we are different because we follow different traditions,” because we grew up in different climates. Recognizing that “humans are made in their interactions with one another,”³²⁴ and all “social relationships are made and remade as subjects encounter one another.”³²⁵ Elif (Muslim) believes that God decided the country and time she would be born, the family she would be raised by, and the faith tradition she would be taught. But she also believes that it is up to her to decide what she will do with what she has been given. Though she has had some challenges with her relationship to her faith community, and some might critique her way of being Muslim, she feels solid in her foundation, in her faith in God, and sees no conflict in learning about God from a variety of faith traditions. Through a process of socialization Leila (Muslim) understands that we accept and embody certain practices and identities, but she wonders: “Am I just Muslim because my parents told me to be?” Possibly. Most of the contributors to this project are affiliated with the same traditions as their parents, twelve have converted to another religion, and four have left organized religion all together. For example, Emma (Humanist) still considers herself culturally Catholic because as a Filipina this ‘home tradition’ is “integral” to her identity. Similarly, Abigail (Wizzle) was raised as a Catholic and has “tremendous fondness for that faith tradition” as a “defining faith tradition” but she has come to see God as so much bigger than the boundaries humans have placed on them. And while

³²⁴ Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

³²⁵ MacDonald, “Toward a Transnational Feminist Methodology of Encounter,” 4.

the Episcopal Church will always be Elsie's "first faith language" she has found beauty and sustenance in other traditions as well.

Many contributors' attest, their family is also where they were introduced to interpretations of scripture and religious dogma that has contributed to the development of an interfaith ethic. Parents, for the most part, are described as being devout to their own faith or worldview, deeply committed to their communities, examples of empathy, non-judgement and open-mindedness, having a willingness to adapt and a desire to serve, not to mention they are also models of curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality. Because lived religion happens "on the margins between orthodox prescriptions and innovative experiences,"³²⁶ in thirdspace, parents teach how to live religion beyond the dogma of institutions. The theology that is 'lived' by individuals is "a fluid mix of ideas gleaned from widely diverging cultural, social, and religious milieu."³²⁷ So, what these contributors bring to the interfaith table are not doctrinal facts, though some of them are more than capable of doing so, but what the doctrines and traditions means to them.

In this chapter I focus on the concept of lived religion, that removes the false notion of religious uniformity and focus on authenticity, as described by contributors. "Lived religion is constituted by the practices people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live."³²⁸ Rather than "religion-as-preached in congregational meetings which they do, or do not, attend,"³²⁹ David Hall offers lived religion as the "embodied and

³²⁶ Ammerman, "Finding Religion in Everyday Life. *Sociology of Religion*," 190.

³²⁷ Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, 66.

³²⁸ McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, 98.

³²⁹ McGuire, "Sacred Place and Sacred Power: Conceptual Boundaries and the Marginalization of Religious Practices," 68.

enacted forms of spirituality that occur in everyday life.”³³⁰ And, as this project argues, interfaith spaces are one of the locations that this embodiment takes place. First, I look at the practices and stories of the dominant religion (read: Christian) as well as those who are ‘Christian-passing’ compared to those associated with minority religions (read: non-Christian). Acknowledging the agency and adaptations that are implemented for minority groups. Next, I consider who is missing from interfaith spaces, namely members of LGBTQ communities, Evangelicals, Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics, as well as Native Americans and Indigenous peoples. The chapter ends with a discussion of social justice and community as central motivators of interfaith engagement.

Because “religion is simply too important a part of cultures and of people’s lives to be ignored,”³³¹ and because religion has not faded away³³² even if it is not always conservative, or orthodox,³³³ lived religion is helpful in articulating those practices and beliefs that are not necessarily approved by religious institutions but are religious none-the-less. Religion is not “neatly separated from the other practices of everyday life.”³³⁴ Though religious communities are often “set apart as sacred” and bounded, the reality is that religion shows up “in all the social arenas of life... even if they are not supposed to be.”³³⁵ Ammerman continues, “it is not just that people take religion into everyday life, they also take everyday life into religion.”³³⁶ Those that are “spiritually engaged... bring the everyday world with them into the congregation, talk about all of it with their spiritual friends, and take reframed life narratives with them back into the

³³⁰ Ammerman. Nancy. 2014. Finding Religion in Everyday Life. *Sociology of Religion*, 75:2, 189-207, 189

³³¹ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What’s the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 267.

³³² Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Secularisms*, 18.

³³³ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, 10.

³³⁴ Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, 6.

³³⁵ Ammerman, “The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity,” 161.

³³⁶ Ammerman, “Finding Religion in Everyday Life. *Sociology of Religion*,” 201.

everyday world.”³³⁷ So, while humans may be able to “compartmentalize their religious and their non-religious habits,” they are still fully religious regardless of space.³³⁸ Hence, there is potential for organic interfaith encounters to take place in any space in which one has contact with any religious or non-religious other.

For example, as an instructor Zhang (Baha’i) is cognizant of the importance of not vocalizing her religion to her students, but does manifest her beliefs through her actions and attitudes. “Everything I do has a connection to my faith.” Zhang’s involvement with women’s leadership development, is motivated by the Baha’i teachings of gender equality. So, as Elsie (Protestant) supports families that are dealing with Alzheimers, dementia, and other mental illnesses, as Deborah (Jewish) works for Habitat for Humanity, as Francis (New Thought) supports her community as a social worker, and as Aisha uses her talent as a poet to bring attention to domestic violence, spirituality, beliefs, and ethical commitments motivate actions in diverse spaces and ways.

Utilizing the concept of lived religion, allows for an intersectional understanding of religious identity that is impacted by gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, ethnic and racial identity, country of origin, and political leanings. The motivations to enter interfaith spaces and the experiences and negotiations that happen therein, diverge and converge based on social location, as well as physical space. Thus, this project offers examples of how, where, and why individuals encounter religious others. The object of this project is not to conclude with a defined interfaith space, but to validate the lived religion that transforms spaces into interfaith spaces focusing on the ideological movements that are grounded in physical place.

³³⁷ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, 110.

³³⁸ Dillon, “Can Post-Secular Society Tolerate Religious Differences?,” 148.

Lived religion reminds us that, unlike Ahmed's table, religion does not always match what we "expect" to see. Religious objects might stay the same, but religion does not, because it is lived. The table is only the same if we conjure its missing sides (the sides we can't see from our current vantage point). Lived religion helps us "imagine and investigate the spaces where religion is produced that might appear to be outside of what we currently understand to be religious institutions."³³⁹ Similarly, if we decide what religion already is, then there is no reason to look behind to see for ourselves. Interfaith, however, opens up possibilities of entering the background and encountering something surprising as well as something that resonates.

Just as Ahmed attempts to apprehend a table. Here I attempt to apprehend religion, my own as well as others. Interfaith allows me to do that in some way. Religion is always already in the background in the United States of America, a nation that claims a Christian foundation and is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. To apprehend our own traditions, as well as the traditions of the religious other I use Ahmed's method of walking around religion, "as if I had not encountered it before; seeing it as an object means not describing [religion] as occupying a familiar order."³⁴⁰ Often we see an other's religion this way, but interfaith offers an opportunity to see our own tradition through the eyes of the other, to describe, interact, and practice religion in ways our "biographical and practical knowledge"³⁴¹ has not allowed. Seeing religion in this way, "as if I did not already know it or even know what I do with it"³⁴² opens up possibilities. It humbles us to see "the partiality of absence as well as presence,"³⁴³ in other words, to see what our own tradition lacks as well as what our own tradition has to offer.

³³⁹ Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*, 47.

³⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 35.

³⁴¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 35.

³⁴² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 35.

³⁴³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 37.

Interfaith participants strive to be seen as either separate from the religion that they affiliate with or the best embodiment of the tradition they can be. Though institutional interfaith emphasizes on traditional religious affiliation, many participants would argue that their participation in interfaith spaces is a spiritual practice that allows them to do something more, or at least different, than what they can do in their religious spaces. Exercising an interfaith ethic offers the freedom to “draw from many different religious components in putting together a life”³⁴⁴ while remaining faithful, in their own ways of being ‘authentically’ religious.

Agency and Adaptations

“Leftist cultures”³⁴⁵ often reduce religion to an oppressive entity but this project used the work of Peter Berger to argue that contributors actually remain committed to their religious or worldview traditions through the use of rejection and adaptation of doctrine or cultural practices they take issue with. Rather than leave, contributors reject cultural beliefs and practices they find problematic and adapt beliefs and practices in ways they can live with. For those that are uncomfortable with this reality, Bidwell reminds:

All religions are constantly edited, refined, expanded, reformed, and reconstructed, intentionally or not, as people incorporate ideas and practices from a variety of traditions into their own religious lives.³⁴⁶

The agency used to incorporate ideas and practices require the cultivation of an interfaith ethic which first accepts the authenticity of lived religion and acknowledges the agency others use to live religion. Many “challenge tradition and subvert norms”³⁴⁷ through overt critique, subversive ambivalence, or creativity and adaptation, none of which require resistance, even if they are

³⁴⁴ Ammerman, “The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity,” 161.

³⁴⁵ Georgis, *The Better Story: Queer Affects From the Middle East*, 98.

³⁴⁶ Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn't Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People*, 142.

³⁴⁷ Georgis, *The Better Story: Queer Affects From the Middle East*, 98.

perceived to be resisting. Resilience on the other hand is “not expressed as a fight against something but a desire for something otherwise.”³⁴⁸ This expanded understanding of agency see’s it not as an act, but a “modality of action.”³⁴⁹ In fact, it is in these interfaith settings where “collective agency” exercised by groups of religious actors “seek common ends.”³⁵⁰ To be clear, these religious actors do not practice the same religion, and what is common is often political or social, but none-the-less, motivated by religious convictions. In using Ahmed’s discussion of “sticky objects” applied to livingness of religion, we can see how our religious beliefs and practices are impacted by religious others.

“Think of a sticky object; what it picks up on its surface “shows’ where it has traveled and what it has come into contact with. You bring your past encounters with you when you arrive. In this sense an arrival has not simply happened; an arrival points toward a future that might or “perhaps” will happen.”³⁵¹

If religion is the “sticky object,” each space one travels to, ‘picks up’ and colors how one lives religion and what interpretations, or modifications are made. Adaptations do not happen to an individual, but an individual uses agency to adapt. Conceptualizing agency, Bhabha suggests that the “moment when something is beyond control, but it is not beyond accommodation”³⁵² agency is used. Those who occupy space, change how that space is conceived, perceived, and used, even as space dictates how religion will be lived. Following along with Hall, “religious ideas and impulses” are impacted by time and space, “invented, taken, borrowed, and improvised at the intersections of life.”³⁵³ This is lived religion. Being raised to accommodate or make, what Patricia calls “little adaptations”, is much more attainable for Christians in a Christian nation

³⁴⁸ Georgis, “Play and the Affective Space of Hope in Hani Abu-Assad’s *The Idol*,” 1.

³⁴⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 157.

³⁵⁰ Brekus, “Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency,” 81.

³⁵¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 40.

³⁵² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 17.

³⁵³ Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, 8.

than non-Christian contributors who have to make those adaptations every day in order to engage in civic life, let alone interfaith spaces. While it may be true that “religious communities have survived and even flourished to the degree that they have not tried to adapt themselves to the alleged requirements of a secularized world,”³⁵⁴ they have, to some degree, adapted to the Christian world. For example, Elif remembers celebrating Christmas in her Muslim home, justifying the celebration as the Prophet Jesus’ birthday. But Elif also considers that her parents might have had a desire to help her to feel assimilated, while also enjoying the “twinkling lights and decorations.”

Nellie sees her Acjachemen ancestors as “deeply spiritual people” who were able to make “little adaptations” in order to survive colonization. Tisa Wenger argues that “Indians have had to represent their traditions according to prevailing concepts of what counts as religion.”³⁵⁵ For example: “The concept of water was really important to my ancestors, so the water of baptism... wasn't as difficult as it could have been.” In addition, as Deloria presents “some tribes shifted their ceremonial year to coincide with the whites’ holidays and conducted their most important rituals on national holidays and Christian feast days.”³⁵⁶ In fact, Nellie believes that the choices her ancestors made to make ‘little adaptations’ – to convert in order to survive – means that through oral traditions, families were able to keep the language and traditions alive. Nellie remains committed to her indigenous heritage and her Catholic tradition, proving her interfaith ethic.

‘Little adaptations’ or compromises made in order to fit in and make religious others comfortable. For example, when Savitri attended a private Catholic boarding school in India, she

³⁵⁴ Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, 4.

³⁵⁵ Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom*, 237.

³⁵⁶ Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 271.

created an interfaith space by her Hindu presence. In following her tradition, Savitri created a small shrine to her Goddess in her room but was told by Mother Superior that she would need to remove it, because it was seen as idolatry. Savitri used agency and threatened to leave school because she refused to give up her traditions. A compromise was reached, and Savitri was allowed to keep the shrine in her cabinet where it could be shuttered and not seen by the Catholic majority, but she could still live her religion, even in an adapted way.

Catherine's Christian grandparents immigrated to the United States from the Muslim majority country of Syria. When they arrived Catherine's grandmother wore head scarves and prayed with two open hands, palms up. When she taught Catherine to pray it was with two open hands, palms up – a traditional Muslim posture. One day, some of Catherine's Muslim friends attended church with her and brought this to her attention that everyone else prayed with closed or folded hands. Catherine began to consider why she was taught to pray this way. If we acknowledge that all religions borrow from the cultures and forms of spirituality that surround and precede them, these important ideas and practices eventually seem natural.³⁵⁷ Her grandmother's family were some of the only Christians in Homs, Syria and this 'little adaptation' that was passed down may have helped this Christian family blend in with the dominant tradition of the community. Fast forward four-generations later, Catherine now lives in a Christian majority country, and the Muslim's around her are the ones making these 'little adaptations.'

However, in other ways, minorities might hold on to their differences and refuse to make 'little adaptations.' For example, Shaheen (Muslim) witnessed her parents become "more in tune with their faith, the longer they are in America." In fact, her mother didn't start wearing hijab until Shaheen was in high school. This observation brings our attention to the impact of space on

³⁵⁷ Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn't Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People*, 19.

faith. That is, faith can be strengthened, hindered, shifted, or deepened depending on the space. Rather than assimilate, being a minority in a diverse space can lead one to lean into their difference they bring to the space.

Often these encounters, according to Cragg, “involves both displacement of the inhabitants and cultural assimilation from the position of the migrants, unless it is a colonial migration, in which case the conditions are reversed.”³⁵⁸ In the United States the religious other is typically defined as non-Christian. Since this project focuses on women and non-binary folks, those who are marginalized and othered in most spaces, Lugones suggests that they, specifically women of color, are “world” travelers as a matter of “necessity and of survival.”³⁵⁹

As a Sikh American, born and raised in the United States, Sophia intentionality claims her identity. She found kinship with Jewish friends who claim their cultural and religious identity first and foremost as an enduring reminder of presence in space in the face of genocide and persecution. Though Sahib grew up knowing that people saw her and her family as ‘exotic,’ Yael hopes that as more people engage in interfaith spaces, these religious others (specifically non-Christian) will no longer be seen as “exotic” but as “Americans who happen to worship in a way that is different from the way that I worship.” These experiences are more about visible identity than religious affiliation – how Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and non-white Christians are seen not as religiously diverse but as collectively other – other than ‘American.’

In these moments Sophia has realized that there are parts of her identity that she could ‘give up’ in order to be more ‘acceptable’ to white America, but at what cost? Sophia counters: “If I were to give up my identity, what do I have left? I will still to be othered. Is it worth it? So,

³⁵⁸ Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

³⁵⁹ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, 61.

what if you think you've assimilated? What does that look like?" Interfaith spaces provide an opportunity to be surrounded by others who experience similar dilemmas but have determined to lean into their religious and other identities. In these spaces they feel support, they resonate, and they realize that they are not alone.

Non-Christian Motivations and Experiences

Recognizing that “majority group status shapes the meaning of place and space and impacts... the tone and quality of the interactions that can occur.”³⁶⁰ Interfaith in America has an opportunity to engage in political discussions and address social justice concerns surrounding race, sexual orientation, immigration, and economic inequality. But to address social concerns interfaith must contend with the reality that the divisions that exist in society often also exists in religious spaces and thus transferred into interfaith spaces. For example, Emma (Humanist) remarks that “white people don't have black friends, black people don't have Asian friends... and the same goes for religion.” Similarly, Betty has noticed racial isolation in Muslim spaces. Thus, the majority-minority dynamic not only plays out across religious lines, but within religious traditions creating intra-faith conflicts.

Interfaith efforts of non-Christians in the United States are often a matter of necessity. For religious minorities, interfaith efforts take place in a “Christian nation”³⁶¹ making the ‘common ground’ of the United States is more comfortable for Christians to stand on, while those affiliated with minority traditions (non-Christian) must push themselves into interfaith

³⁶⁰ Hopkins. 2011, 536

³⁶¹ Eck, Diana L. 2002. *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

spaces in order to assert their presence.³⁶² Often interfaith participation is used to prove to the Christian majority that they are ‘good people.’³⁶³ As Stephen Merino observed, many (Christian) Americans believe that “being a non-Christian is antithetical to being a good American.”³⁶⁴ Merino suggests that “[Christian] Americans show reluctance to fully incorporate non-Christians into social life.”³⁶⁵ It is necessary to complicate these statements. First, Americans as a whole are not reluctant to incorporate non-Christians, because there are many American’s who are non-Christian. So, a more accurate statement would be amongst Christian Americans, negative attitudes toward non-Christians are common. Offering a searing critique of those who are or wish to be in the majority, Asma asks “would you be part of the group marginalizing other people?” Conceding that the nature of dominant cultures is to force assimilation, Asma acknowledges: “if we were in a Muslim country, this conversation would be inverted on itself. Then I would be the majority.”

For non-Christians, interfaith participation seems to be primarily motivated by a need to be known and to build alliances. Elizabeth assumes that non-Christians often enter interfaith spaces with a desire for “people to know who they are [and] to understand them,” in order to counter stereotypes and reduce prejudice and stigma. This can happen in institutional interfaith spaces because there is an assumption that everyone who shows up is trying to do the same thing, that is “trying to understand” religious others. However, as Elizabeth points out it is those from minority (read: non-Christian) traditions that are the most likely to engage in interfaith spaces. Because, unlike members of dominant groups, minorities feel like they need to be understood in

³⁶² Pendersen, Kusumita P. 2004. The interfaith Movement: An Incomplete Assessment. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. 41:1.

³⁶³ As Sophia reflected on the response of neighbors, “who had been hesitant” of her and the Sikh community, but after the San Bernardino terrorist attack, made a point to tell her and her family that they were “good people”.

³⁶⁴ Merino, “Religious Diversity in a ‘Christian Nation,’” 233.

³⁶⁵ Merino, 232.

order to survive and thrive. Supporting this analysis, Asma argues that minorities are always “seeking inclusion... a sense of belonging” which at times may lead to reproducing the exclusion. For example, during a high school history lesson on World War Two, another student who was Polish Catholic turned to Asma and said: “You know, my people hate Jews too.” Being “very much aware” that she didn’t “fit in” she felt “sad” that the assumption that she belonged to something hateful created a similarity. Reflecting on her experiences Asma recognizes that at times the price of being included is actually being paid by other minority communities.

Esther came to the United States for school: “For the first 10 years, I was this Iranian who lived in America” but then she became a citizen and saw herself as an “American who was born in Iran.” America was her home. For many non-Christian contributors, including Esther, 9/11 was disorienting because it made ‘home’ uninhabitable for some and uncomfortable for most. Shaheen experienced “every stereotypical thing that you can think of,” including being told to “go home” as if America isn’t her home. Concerned for her safety, her parents continually admonish her to stay in her home. But, as Shaheen explains, “for those of us who grew up in America and who consider this to be our home,” being told to stay home or go home were complicated petitions causing her to choose between “safety and identity.”

While contributors have admiration for the United States, as Fatima has noticed, in the aftermath of 9/11, it seemed that America did not have a deep love or curiosity for her or her faith, or any non-Christian faith for that matter. This is why, as Sophia explains, “being an American comes second, because sometimes... the privilege of being American is not always afforded to minority communities... we are aware that.... That flag isn’t always representing all of us.... I’ll always be a Sikh... even though I was born here there is a bit of work of proving who I am as an American.” This is a common trend amongst those non-Christian participants in

a Christian dominated society, forces the labor of translation and assimilation creating a deeper connection to ‘home traditions.’ Thus, coming to interfaith spaces from a minority and immigrant communities, some contributors feel pressure to speak on behalf of their faith. Commitment to an interfaith ethic and awareness of lived religion recognizes that no one can speak to all experiences of all members of a community. There are authorized representatives that tow the doctrinal line, but each individual has the ability to interpret that line based on resonance and experience.

The conscious awareness of diversity within religion does not remove the burden some feel to be the “walking billboard”³⁶⁶ for their tradition. Being born and raised in the United States meant that Sahib’s experiences and the experiences of the Sikh communities that have been in the United States for 150 years is different than those Sikhs who immigrated to the US in the wake of the 1984 Sikh genocide. Sahib and Sophia see themselves as being a bridge between the immigrant Sikh community and “American” spaces. As a convert to Islam, Linda also feels a responsibility to be a ‘billboard’ to the rest of America. Though not always noticeable because of her headscarf, Linda feels that her ‘whiteness,’ allows her to act as a ‘translator,’ so-to-speak, between white American Christian culture and Muslim and immigrant communities. However, the commitment that Linda has to being an “ambassador” for Islam seems to have placed an unwanted burden on some of her children. As she was raising her three children, whenever they would go out, she shared: “I would give this pep talk: We are examples of Muslims to these people we have to be on our best behavior.” At one point, one of her daughters said: “I don’t want to be the example of Islam to anybody. I don’t care. You can do whatever you want, but I’m just gonna be me.” This response took Linda by surprise, she reflects: “I had no idea that I was

³⁶⁶ Sande

doing this to them, that it was a stress on them. To me it was an honor.” While Mariah appreciates that some have anxiety about carrying this “burden,” Mariah sees it as simply “living my life” in a way that breaks down misconceptions. While Mariah’s method is more organic, Fatima noticed a shift in her focus from learning about others, to feeling a responsibility to share her story as a Muslim American after 9/11. Her parent’s openness to having friends of other faiths and her willingness to enter interfaith spaces identified her as someone who could be a representative of Islam and dispel stereotypes.

The need that minority groups feel to be informed about the dominant groups beliefs and practices is not unique to the United States. Though many non-Muslim contributors were aware of Surah³⁶⁷ 49, Ayat³⁶⁸ 13 which states: “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another,”³⁶⁹ Asma points out that the emphasis on this Ayat is unique to the United States. This oft quoted Ayat is offered at many interfaith events by Muslim participants as their motivations for doing interfaith work, however as Asma points out, the knowledge and interpretation of this Ayat, and the motivation to use it is dependent on space and time, and the social position of the individual using it. Rather than wholly agreeing in its ability to motivate Muslims to participate in interfaith, she offered a nuanced view of the importance of space. Space determines salient identities. In Asma’s interfaith work both of her identities as ‘Muslim’ and ‘woman’ are apparent, but in most spaces in the United States her identity as a Muslim becomes central to engagement. However, when Asma is in a Muslim majority country “everything changes,” she becomes associated with the dominant group and being a woman becomes the identity that “still sticks.”

³⁶⁷ Book in the Quran

³⁶⁸ Verse of scripture

³⁶⁹ <https://quran.com/49/13?translations=43,19,101,85,84,21,20,17,95,22,18> Saheeh International

Asma contemplates: “Muslims spend a lot of time on that passage now because we’re the minority” but, she continues, “if I were sitting in the middle of the Ottoman Empire, 150 years ago, do you think anyone was talking about that passage?” Probably not. For example, growing up in Egypt and before engaging in interfaith communities in the US, Hafsa, an Egyptian-American immigrant, wasn’t aware of what the Quran said about religious others, but now she says she can “see the phrases about other religions... and see what God meant about how to deal with each other.” Asma continues: “As a majority you get to be complacent, you are free and welcome to be yourself, to occupy arrant space wherever you go. When you're in the minority you have to be ready to advocate.

Interfaith spaces still require all that enter to perform the labor of translation in order to engage with religious others.³⁷⁰ Translation is more often performed by minority groups so the dominant group can understand the communication. For example, when Savitri (Hindu) was invited to join an interfaith conversation on the topic of justice, she struggled to know what to say. Savitri’s first thought was “we don’t talk of justice” in Hinduism. This is an example of how interfaith spaces are often created with a desire to find ‘common ground,’ but the language used is often determined by the dominant (Christian) group, making it difficult for some to stand on that ground. It requires extra labor by those invited to participate to move into that space and to translate their own understandings into a language that is understandable for others, specifically the dominant group. With the help of her mother, Savitri was able to translate the concept of justice into the concept of Karma,³⁷¹ then translate karma back into the language of justice, so the

³⁷⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 326. “translation is the performative nature of cultural communication.”

³⁷¹ Rini: “What is the theory of karma, but justice? It’s not just enforced by any court, it’s enforced by your soul. Your Atman. Whatever work you do, it will have its effect. It’s like a bank account, you put the good ones here and the bad ones there, and you might get your results in this life, but believe you me if you don’t get it in this life, it will come in your next life and you will get all your results. That’s karma.”

interfaith community could understand. Borrowing from Anzaldua, the labor of translation is a manifestation of illegitimacy. “As long as I have to accommodate the [Christian] speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my [religion] will be illegitimate.”³⁷² While this experience helped Savitri to understand what she called karma to also be ‘cosmic justice,’ what if, instead of Savitri having to shift her language to understand karma as justice, religious others began to understand justice as karma?

Deloria suggests that “instead of observing other religions and finding that they are “close” to Christianity, Christians would be wise to begin a search for religious experience and certainty itself regardless of the consequences.”³⁷³ But the reality is that in a Christian-centric nation non-Christians end up ‘translating’ for themselves and others. Another example of translation offered by Fatima, who works as a hospital chaplain. When she was in her CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) training, concepts such as hope, suffering, the afterlife, and doubt were presented in a Christian context. After reading the curriculum she would then go to Islamic sources to find compatible teachings in her own “spiritual language.” When she would “read or hear a biblical story that resonated or triggered a memory” she would go to the scripture and ask herself “What is different? What is the same?” While there was never a time, that she can recall, when an interpretation or interfaith conversation “changed” her beliefs, the extra labor did provide her with “a deeper understanding and appreciation” of her own faith tradition.

However, not all non-Christians have the same experience in a Christian nation, and it is not only in Christian nations that some are marginalized. Whether Amyra is in the US or Iran, as a Zoroastrian she is a minority. Growing up in the US history books presented Judaism as the

³⁷² Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 81.

³⁷³ Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 234.

first monotheistic religion and would never mention her Zoroastrian tradition. Reflecting, she shares: “My identity is not being recognized... it was pretty discouraging.” Considering that not being part of an Abrahamic tradition makes it difficult for others to connect, or resonate, with her beliefs and practices. Amyra acknowledged: “We don't focus on God as much. We don't necessarily go to church every Sunday to have a sermon. Our practices are a lot different than other people.” As she pointed out each of these distinctions, I was impressed by her Christian fluency, and the labor of translation that she performed to use words such as ‘church’ and ‘sermon,’ further normalizing Christianity even in interfaith spaces.

Elif’s parents gave her a script, so she was ready when (Christian) friends at school questioned her belief in Jesus. Elif said: “Yes, we believe in Jesus. We believe he was born to Mary, and it was a miracle.” Though this was a simple explanation, it seemed to pacify her friends. Similarly, Rachel’s parents “explained” an academic version Christmas and Easter that allowed her to engage with Christian and secular neighbors. These experiences further support Asma’s analysis that the dominant group rarely sees a need to learn about, or accommodate, a minority community. It is not that these non-Christian parents were necessarily trying to encourage interfaith experiences but were providing their children with tools of Christian knowledge to hopefully keep them safe as they navigate a Christian nation.

Who is missing and why?

In an attempt to fulfill the interfaith goal of radical inclusion that is professed by at least half of the contributors, we are required to ask: who is missing? Many contributors critique institutional interfaith for engaging the ‘same crowd,’ that is, those already committed to interfaith efforts. The group most often noted as missing from interfaith spaces is evangelical

Christians and other conservative religions. To a lesser extent there is also an acknowledgement of the absence of other religious and identity groups such as Hindu, Catholic, African American, Native American, LGBTQIA+, humanists and atheists.

When considering who is and is not present in interfaith spaces, contributors are self-reflective as to the reasons why. It is clear that institutional interfaith spaces are created by compassionate people with good intentions but want to remain comfortable. For those that are missing from these interfaith spaces, Naima queries, “how do you show that to someone who doesn’t want to come?” How might discomfort on both sides be overcome? Her suggestion is to focus on building organic relationships, “one on one,” gradually easing people into “larger spaces” with more diversity. These interpersonal relationships seem to be the preferred method of engaging communities that have either been harmed by religion, have an interpretation of religion that precludes them from engaging in interfaith, in any meaningful way, or those who could care less about religion. In acknowledging the absence of specific groups from interfaith spaces, Shaheen consider how interfaith spaces would need to change in order to become comfortable for those who are not already participating. Whether from conservative or liberal traditions, whether non-religious or an-other worldview, radical inclusion will require radical openness.

LGBTQIA+

While Judith recognizes the “interesting relationship” the interfaith movement has with queer identities, Naima calls out the “false dichotomy between religion and being LGBT” while also acknowledging that many “LGBT people feel alienated.” Leslie concurs, pointing out that “many LGBT identifying people” have moved “past religion because they don’t sense a space for them there.” For Leslie “the existence of interfaith is hopeful” but sometimes they feel that

their queer identity is “butting up against interfaith,” and that there is “no room for queer identities in interfaith... partially because religion has been used to harm queer folks.” Therefore, an assumption can be made that interfaith struggles with including LGBTQ people because religions struggle to include them. Highlighting a recurring theme of this project that the same challenges that religions are dealing with are often replicated in interfaith spaces.

Reflecting on one of her first interfaith experiences, Amy had a glimpse of what interfaith could be. Living in Long Beach in 2010 a local synagogue was made aware that Westboro Baptist³⁷⁴ was planning a demonstration. The Rabbi of the synagogue made the decision to cancel services, while also inviting the entire community to worship together. Attending this gathering, Amy was amazed by the interfaith representation. “It was so beautiful.” As “the haters showed up” the community formed a chain around the synagogue. “I’ll never forget as long as I live, the Rabbi taking the Torah scrolls and a representative from Latter-day Saints, from the Catholics, the Muslims, on and on. Everybody was holding it and touching it and standing up at the Bimah. Together.” The agenda of Westboro was to disrupt the community, but what Amy observed was people from diverse religious traditions coming together to say “this is not okay.” Amy was most impressed with the LDS representative³⁷⁵ because “it didn’t matter what her views on gay marriage were, she knew that this hatred was not okay.” This experience gave Amy a vision for what interfaith could be. “We can hold that tension and have our different beliefs, but stand together against hatred, and against bigotry.” But she concedes: “I don’t think we’re there yet.” I think she is right. Digging a bit deeper I also point out that the Mormon

³⁷⁴ Westboro Baptist, a fundamentalist group that has been aggressive in their opposition to the LGBTQ community as well as other communities, including the Jewish community.

³⁷⁵ I am assuming this LDS representative was not a ‘leader’ in the sense that they had the priesthood, given that it was a woman, or that they had a ‘calling’ over the community, given that they were a woman. Similarly, at the pulse night club event I was the ‘representative’ but I do not have a calling, there were men in the audience that did have leadership callings but because of their position, I assume, they were not able to publically participate.

representatives was female, begging the question of her ecclesiastical authority to represent The Church. Regardless, the perception of her was positive for the community.

Fast forward a few years, Amy has recently resigned from the board of an interfaith council. Wanting to ensure that I understood her respect and love for interfaith work, but admitted “I just can’t work with them.” When Amy was asked to join the board, she solicited advice from Catherine and others. Her hesitancy was based on the fact that the board consisted of mostly “old white guys”, and she knew that she was being asked to join in order to add “diversity.” But representation without respect is abusive. Amy recalls leaving a meeting in tears because she felt that her voice had not been heard, and was specifically ignored when it came to LGBTQ topics. As Amy shared her experiences, she took a moment to confirm: “You’re Mormon, right?” Pointing out that it was the Mormon, Catholic, and Muslim contingents who professed religious freedom as their justification for holding prejudice views toward LGBTQ people. Amy remembers, it “was a big deal [that] we finally got the Catholics to come” so everyone was “walking on eggshells” which resulted in an intentional avoidance of certain conversations in order to keep him coming, and not offend the other conservative council members. Here I will raise the concern that those efforts that are made to keep conservative (male) leaders comfortable are made at the expense of minority (women and queer) lay people. Religious leaders may act as representatives of the tradition and may serve as proof that interfaith engagements are ‘successful’, but representation without the recognition of the full humanity of all participants is exploitation.

After another rather “contentious meeting” Amy walked up to the Catholic representative, shook his hand, and said “I don’t think we’re gonna agree on very much, but I’m really glad you’re here so that we can have these conversations.” However, conversations were

never had. At one point a letter in support of California Assembly Bill 329 which is dubbed the 'Healthy Kids Act' was submitted to the board with a request for endorsement. Amy recalls: "the tension in the room was pretty thick." The general consensus was to refuse endorsement of the bill which, in part, supported LGBTQ students and gender affirming language. Amy remembers thinking: "Am I invisible? We're talking about kids' lives here. You're talking about me and my wife here, who is the rector of the church that you are using." It was a "really painful conversation" and in the end Amy admitted to herself: "I don't think I can be here anymore... I was just holding back my tears." For the few members that recognized Amy's pain, the comfort they offered was less than satisfying. Justifying their condemnation of the bill by claiming protection against a "gay agenda," with an attempt to separate Amy from their discontent. One participant suggested that individual members could add their support to the letter, and Amy appreciated this gesture. But, at the end of the day, Amy left this institutional interfaith space feeling ignored and hurt.

Institutional interfaith would need to change in some significant ways for Amy to participate again. She suggests starting with exercising the interfaith ethic of curiosity. Rather than writing the LGBTQ community off, interfaith participants can say: "Wow, that's going to be challenging for me because my church teaches there's only one kind of family and, I know that's not your family. But how can we go forward with this?... Where can we find some common ground in this?" Amy knows it will "continue to be hard for some women, and certainly for members of the LGBTQ community, when you're sitting down with people that refuse to acknowledge your humanity." On the other hand, Johnny, whose institutional interfaith experiences have been with a different interfaith group made of mostly women, they felt

welcomed in interfaith spaces. It is Johnny's opinion that even though they are not religious "it is worth it to have multiple views on an issue... it's worth having everyone's voice."

Amy holds that a willingness to engage in difficult conversations is not a luxury but a necessity. Even after the trauma she has experienced in institutional interfaith spaces, Amy still attends intentional interfaith events like iftars, seders, and Hanukkah dinners and holds interfaith relationships. She claims not to have issues in these intentional interfaith spaces. "I'm not walking around with a 'L' on my forehead... Nobody bats an eyelash, because we're not there to talk about our home lives, we're there to be together in community." She is grateful for these experiences.

While Amy's experience with one institutional interfaith space was painful, other interfaith spaces have been healing. For example, after the Pulse shooting many in the interfaith community came together to address the tragedy and build bridges between religious communities and the LGBTQ community. The groundbreaking iftar event brought together by a local interfaith council, had support from political officials and the LGBTQ center. Another example was the response of individuals with an interfaith ethic to an anti-LGBTQ group that was trying to stop a Gay Strait Alliance (GSA) club at a local southern California high school. Helen received a call from a school board member who was hoping to leverage Helen's interfaith relationships in support of LGBTQ students at a school board meeting.

We had Christians, Jewish Rabbis, Bishops, and Imams. I can't remember how many were on our line.... By the time the evening was over we only heard two that were against the GSA... Everybody else, including so many articulate kids, stood up and spoke.

Helen watched as a Mormon man, stood up and shared: "As a Mormon, a member of the interfaith council, and an attorney... I draw the strength to say that these kids deserve to be safe. They deserve respect. They deserve the best." Reflecting on this experience Helen presumed that

this was a difficult statement for him to make since there is a well-known Mormon opposition to the LGBTQ community and assumes making this statement was “going against his own church.” And yet it is Helen’s assessment that he was living out his religion in that space.

Jane (Mormon) observed, the youth from the LDS community, the same community that Amy associates with anti-LGBTQ doctrine and conservative ideologies were the largest group of support. “There were a lot of kids there who are LDS and strongly support their friends, if not themselves, because of their own situations.” Jane believes “that is where their hearts are at.” What was powerful to Jane, as she observed this meeting, is that “kids were willing to speak up about their own identities, not only to defend them but to embrace them.” She recognized the courage of the youth to stand up for their identities and their friends, especially the LDS kids whose parents might be more conservative, like those adults that Amy has encountered. The actions of these religious people made a school board meeting an organic interfaith space. It was a civic space, not organized by a religious institution, but attended by religious people. It was a public space influenced by religion, on both sides.

What Pulse and the GSA school board meeting shows us is that interfaith – as a space of radical inclusion – can be a space of possibilities, opportunities, and hope for the LGBTQ community. When Joan came out to her Catholic parents during her last semester of college, interfaith gave her the confidence to do so. Interfaith allowed her to form genuine friendships that provided a “safety net” of sorts, so she didn't feel the need to “fit into this one perfect little [Catholic] box anymore.” There was no longer a need to hide. She was nervous about telling her parents about her sexuality, she “also had a very strong community of other people from different traditions who were super accepting” of her.

Evangelicals

Religious diversity is “a vexing problem for a religion like Christianity, which understands its worldview to be uniquely true.”³⁷⁶ Based on the work of Riess, and De La Torre, and Taylor it is clear that “Christians are as divided from one another as [they] are from people of different faiths.”³⁷⁷ According to Merino, “Mainline Protestants and Catholics are significantly more likely than evangelical Protestants to value religious diversity.”³⁷⁸ This is apparent as Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists engage in interfaith spaces, though some still hold conservative views. For orthodox traditions in general, interfaith participation is difficult, because as Deborah suggests “people haven’t reconciled the idea that simply being in the room and listening, does not mean that you are any less of who you are.” Offering another perspective, Johnny shares that many evangelical Christians believe that being in an interfaith space means that they are “denying the Christ by even acknowledging that other traditions exist.” Even if there is a “mutual belief in God” interfaith’s protection against proselytization “goes against the grain of the church’s mission to evangelize the world.”³⁷⁹ Speaking specifically of evangelical participation, Martha (Mormon) shares: “We need them on our on our team, but they won’t touch [interfaith] with a 10-foot pole because they can’t profess the name of Jesus Christ.” Of all the contributors, the only ones who articulated an interfaith struggle to ‘profess Jesus,’ or any specific religious doctrine, were the Mormons, making clear an unacknowledged link between Mormons and Evangelicals. Looking at the responses, it is the Jewish contributors that are more likely to struggle with hearing Jesus, and Mormon contributors

³⁷⁶ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 16.

³⁷⁷ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 146.

³⁷⁸ Merino, “Religious Diversity in a ‘Christian Nation,’” 239.

³⁷⁹ Smith, *Unreconciled: From Racial Reconciliation to Racial Justice in Christian Evangelicalism*, 137.

that are more likely to struggle with not hearing Jesus. Everyone else seems to have neutral or favorable feelings about Jesus, as long as he is not being used in a proselytizing way. The exception is that Mormon participants seems to hold many evangelical characteristics, while also being rejected by evangelical Christians. Thus using interfaith as a way to assert their faith and promote understanding.

Many interfaith participants are aware of the absence of evangelical participation, but unlike the lack of effort put forth to include LGBTQ, Atheists, or people of color, there are efforts to invite evangelicals into interfaith spaces. For example, Zainab describes the interfaith board she was a part of as being “diverse” but in the wake of California’s Prop 8, that diversity caused tension. While some evangelicals left interfaith spaces, Gloria remembers gay participants feeling “unfomfortable and angry” that members of the interfaith Council donated “huge amounts of money to Prop 8.” While there was no mention of trying to bring LGBTQ members back, Zainab did plead with the evangelicals that left: “We need your voice. We need everyone at the table.” This is very different than what Amy experienced, as a gay woman, when she left the interfaith council. Recognizing that participation cannot be forced, Leila (Muslim) exemplifies spiritual maturity that comes from “self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-esteem” allowing her “to reach out to other people who live under impasse”³⁸⁰ regardless of the consequences. Though impasse is an experience that results from oppression, which cannot be claimed by evangelicals; impasse requires a thirdspace and that is where Lelia (Muslim) hopes to meet the religious other. It is her belief that those who are unable to engage in interfaith should not be “ignored or tossed aside.”

³⁸⁰ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*, 89.

Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics

For people who have written off religion, it just feels like there is no space for them in interfaith. - Leslie

Ammerman reminds us that: “There is no theoretical reason to believe that morality or spiritual sensitivity are only cultivated in organized religious communities,”³⁸¹ thus including non-religious others in interfaith spaces can expand understandings of diversity and create radical inclusion. It is Emma’s contention that “humanists and atheists have a lot to gain from being in conversation with religious communities because [they] have resources like buildings, money, community connections, [and] legitimacy.” While there are material benefits, there are also social benefits. This follows the logic of Seitz who suggests “that secular radicals of any stripe who are seriously interested in coalition among differently marginalized people but balk at the attachments to religion... do so to their own detriment.”³⁸² While institutional interfaith events have not necessarily focused on including non-religious voices, organic interfaith efforts, like Zhang’s (Baha’i) spiritual dialogues have. Zhang hopes that “someday” the interfaith community will include atheists and that interfaith agendas can be created in such a way that “atheists feel that they can engage in spiritual conversations.” Emma (Humanist) has a similar hope:

For too long, this field has been dominated and structured and framed by a very particular worldview and it is my hope that we will continue to challenge those structures because they don't serve everyone, I want everyone to be to feel fed, right, whether they're religious or not. I want them to find belonging and connection.

Institutional interfaith spaces are not quite there yet. By having a space that is open to not only those who affiliate with a religious tradition, but also those like Johnny and Leslie, Emma

³⁸¹ Ammerman, “Finding Religion in Everyday Life. *Sociology of Religion*,” 200.

³⁸² Seitz, *A House of Prayer for All People: Contesting Citizenship in a Queer Church*, 27.

and Abigail, and others to say, 'I am non-religious, but I still want to be here,' and 'I don't want to be written off by others in the room.' For example, when Abigail attended the Parliament of the World's Religions she was constantly asked: "What is your faith tradition?" Abigail's response: "I'm not super religious." A few people would stare until she would say: "Well, I was raised Catholic." While this clarification created a shortcut to understanding for them, it proved to reinscribe the boxing that is done in institutional interfaith spaces. This is evident by the follow-up: "Oh, so you're Catholic!" Though Abigail, recapped this experience in her cheerful and patient demeanor, her concession of: "That's fine, if that's what makes you comfortable, I will be Catholic if you need me to be in a box" highlights the limits of institutional interfaith spaces, and a lack of curiosity on the part of some religious interfaith participants.

Some, like Esther were hesitant to contribute to this project because they don't consider themselves 'religious,' and rarely participates in institutional interfaith spaces, however her work as a Peace Studies educator she understands religion's role in war and peace. In addition, she has relationships with many of the other contributors to this project, making her perspectives vital. As a non-religious person, "it tracks" that Johnny would not being interested in seeking out a space that values religion. However, having been invited into these spaces, and having been made to feel comfortable, they want to be in interfaith spaces because they recognize that voices like theirs are missing.

Emma, who is unabashedly proud of her humanist identity, engages in interfaith as an academic. But this does not mean that all interfaith spaces are welcoming, accepting or comfortable for non-religious participants. Having also been raised Catholic, she struggles with the reaction of those who find out that she is a humanist. Older people are usually confused as to why she would want to participate in interfaith, "assuming" that she is critical of religions and

therefore has little to offer the space. However, as an academic and identifying as a humanist, Emma may have more credibility in interfaith spaces than Abigail who identifies as a ‘whizzle’, a term akin to ‘Sheliaism.’³⁸³ This is not to say that Abigail does not hold authority as a staff member of an interfaith center. Though at times she has felt ‘bad’ about not having a faith tradition, working at the interfaith center has increased her awareness of intersectional identities and has made her a safe person for students, faculty, and staff to talk to.

Native American and Indigenous Peoples

It is becoming more common for institutional interfaith councils to include Native communities. Often, as Asma points out, these invitations are made *coincidentally*, right before Thanksgiving. But just because an interfaith event would like to have a native representative does not obligate a native person to show up. “Indigenous people are often understandably both weary and wary of non-Indigenous interest in their lives,”³⁸⁴ therefore refusal is a use of agency in response to the labor of representation that is being requested. Since “white Americans have already stripped Native Americans of their land, resources, and political independence” the refusal to participate in interfaith may be a way of protecting “the only thing left: their religion.”³⁸⁵ Thus, Kala is constantly having to consider the motivations of those that are inviting her to interfaith spaces, as well as her own motivations for entering them. Kala shares: “I had to really dive in deep... Why am I so uncomfortable coming into this space?”

Having a conversation about the geographical nature of interfaith, especially in the United States, should acknowledge the indigenous land on which interfaith work is taking place.

³⁸³ Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.

³⁸⁴ Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” 19.

³⁸⁵ Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom*, 245.

In fact, Olivia began our interview by acknowledging: “I live in occupied Tongva territory.” Thus, many institutional interfaith organizations are making an effort to offer land acknowledgements at the beginning of their meetings or include native elders in panel discussions. But as Kala and Nellie both advise, interfaith organizers also need to make the effort to know which tribe is associated with the land on which an event is being held and call the appropriate indigenous representative.

Kala’s assessment is that people are drawn to native teachings because they are “thirsty for wisdom” and are possibly searching for something that is “missing in their own tradition.” This analysis suggests that people are not just drawn to native teachings, but interfaith spaces in general. But she cautions, while that might be a good thing, Kala asks us to consider “how are we using” these teachings? The first concern of indigenous people is tokenism, which was made apparent as one contributor lamented the participation of an indigenous person who seemed to have an “agenda that did not parallel with our wanting to have indigenous representation.” In other words, the desire of this interfaith council to be unified was more important than to be inclusive. Another concern of indigenous people is appropriation. Many Native American activists critique the appropriation of “indigenous religious practices” that are pulled “out of their tribal context, without the direction of recognized and experienced tribal religious leaders” and, are often combined “with other rituals of completely different origin.”³⁸⁶ Nellie, who is a tribal elder, recognized this desire and created “a Native American healing service,” for non-Indians. This was a space for those who were curious to get closer to nature and be taught, “but in a way that they would understand.” Because it is “difficult to fit Indian ways of relating to the land

³⁸⁶ Wenger, 244.

within America's predominantly Christian assumptions about what counts as religion."³⁸⁷ In other words, it is difficult to translate, but Nellie took on that labor. According to Kala, another challenge of understanding Native teachings is the lack of a physical text. "It seems a common human failing," Said suggests, "to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human."³⁸⁸ Because the west privileges written knowledge, oral traditions become a secondary knowledge. Since Nellie is both Catholic and a tribal elder, she has a unique ability to bridge the gap between religious and native teachings.

Dividing native people into three broad categories, Kala indicates:

There are the native people who are full Christian. They don't follow their traditional ways at all, they just happen to be of that lineage. Then there's the people that try to walk in both. They are very religious in their chosen religion, but they also hold on to their spiritual ways and try to incorporate both into their way of living. And then there's the ones that don't want to have anything to do with forced religion.

Therefore, Kala suggests that there might be more opportunities for engagement with those indigenous peoples who have also taken on a religious identity, like Nellie. In so doing she fills a perceived gap between Native and religious traditions. Having one foot in the Catholic church and one foot in the Acjachemen culture works for her. Because Nellie is already walking in both spaces, Kala feels that Nellie has cultivated the skills that make her more comfortable in interfaith spaces.

³⁸⁷ Wenger, 7.

³⁸⁸ Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 93.

Politics of Interfaith as Justice Work³⁸⁹

Sahib points to the fact that many national leaders, especially since the 2016 election of Donald Trump, have been “outspoken in their bias” against non-Christians which Sahib acknowledges has embolden some to be “unkind at best and vitriolic at worst.” The need for non-Christians to enter into interfaith alliances has become apparent. Meeting with Rachel (Jewish) the week after the January 6th 2021, attack on the US capital, there was a lot of emotion. “This fucking week... Muslims and Jews have to do this work together because the same assholes are coming at us.” This was a call for political action, even though Rachel was explicit that the work she does is not political. Other interfaith participants are much more willing to lean into justice.

The activist in Dorothy (Catholic) “wants to see us [people of faith, people in interfaith] take some steps on things” – social justice and political things – but she recognizes that “many faith communities don’t because they get caught up in ‘that’s too political’.” Adding and expanding this perspective, Dorothy shared that from her experience it is not uncommon to have “two people in the same church, who supposedly value the same things about sacramental life and the gift of the sacraments. But can be totally at loggerheads on something as simple as feeding the hungry or reaching the poor.” Emma (Humanist) “may have given up” on some interfaith community dialogues in favor of “more interfaith service.” Because talk is cheap and she would rather see interfaith “engage in issues like Israel/Palestine” as well as LGBTQ rights, and racial and economic justice. Jean Zaru lives an interfaith ethic in Palestine with an

³⁸⁹ I was able to receive a small grant to be used to give each participant a small stipend. When I informed contributors of this award, some asked that it be donated back to interfaith efforts, food pantries, or other social justice causes.

interpretation of religion and a commitment to relationships that motivate her action: “My kind of religion is very active, highly political, often controversial, and sometimes very dangerous.”³⁹⁰ Sharing in this ethic, Judith holds a “commitment to be in community with people who are not me” and explains: “I’m willing to develop these relationships across religious difference... even when there’s no justice in the perspective that person brings.” That does not mean that Judith’s focus on justice is ignored, but that opportunities to do justice work might be obscured for a time. Judith continues: “Justice work doesn’t preclude me from relationships with people, of course, who are not committed to that same kind of justice, [but] interfaith work inspires me to stay connected.” Because interfaith work does not always result in justice and is limited in some respects, Judith believes “there is a different set of gifts that come from interfaith work,” a set of gifts that teach us to “privilege relationships over being right.”

Across the board the most common theme that contributors conveyed is their orientation toward social change, to some degree. But as Johnny critiques: Interfaith is “not revolutionary,” and “has a hard time staying relevant.” They concede that revolution is “terrifying,” but I argue that the consequences of avoiding conflict are more terrifying, because they lead to contention. Leila is guided by a Muslim teaching of social action: “God’s preference is for us to act... If you cannot act, you speak out loud against it. And if you’re afraid to speak... of course we always pray.” The problem that many contributors see is that in the midst of injustice and pain, many institutional interfaith efforts go silent.

According to Darryl Li “human rights has long been faulted for failing to capture the diverse ways in which societies conceive of justice.”³⁹¹ Justice, in many ways, is just as difficult

³⁹⁰ Zaru, *Occupied with Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks*.

³⁹¹ Li, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire and the Challenge of Solidarity*, 318.

to define as interfaith. Though not every contributor explicitly used the word justice, justice is a motivating factor for interfaith participation.³⁹² Some are motivated by personal experiences and the examples of religious leaders, others by an interpretation of doctrine, all by a desire to contribute to the betterment of society because they understand that “if we expect this moral universal arc to bend at all toward justice, then it is up to us to do the bending.”³⁹³ From a Jewish perspective Plaskow offers the belief that “the universe is finished, but history is still in the process of formation, and God needs human beings to create a just social order in history.”³⁹⁴ Therefore, according to Plaskow, “spirituality as social justice” is “the essence of human service to God” consisting of “love, justice, and righteousness... [and] moral living.”³⁹⁵ From a Christian perspective Cornel West has said, “justice is what love looks like in public.” Keeping all of this in mind, justice comes with a lot of baggage, so much so that Rachel explicitly differentiates between social justice and social change. Explaining that social change is not political, Rachel reasons that by not engaging justice everyone can be at “the table.” Since the work she does specifically engages Jews and Muslims on, among other things, Israel and Palestine, it seems removing a conversation of justice, removes an opportunity to critique the lack of justice in the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Although Ammerman found that “political action was rarely the subject of overtly religious or spiritual reflection,”³⁹⁶ Prothero argues that “regular attendance at religious services is now one of the best predictors of political affiliation and voting behavior.”³⁹⁷ Keeping in mind

³⁹² Alvizo and Messina, *Women Religion Revolution*, 6.

³⁹³ De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege, Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*.

³⁹⁴ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, 216. Yael explains: “In the Torah we’re taught that human beings are create in the image of God... what that means is that we take on part of God’s role in creating the world... we are entrusted with continuing to create it.”

³⁹⁵ Plaskow, 214.

³⁹⁶ Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, 296.

³⁹⁷ Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, 42.

that there are those who live their religion differently than a majority of their community, it becomes clear that religious affiliation does not always determine political affiliation. Often, especially for those interfaith participants coming from conservative traditions, their political leanings are much more liberal. For example, Elizabeth has noticed that the longer she has done interfaith, the more her politics have shifted “from the right to the left.” Having been the president of a local interfaith council and an active member of the League of Women Voters, Elizabeth sees a clear connection between religion and politics in the way she lives her life. As part of her responsibilities to take charge of election education, Elizabeth set up a town hall event to take place at a local mosque. A few weeks later Elizabeth returned to the mosque to support the school that had been “targeted with hate mail.” While there, members of the mosque recognized her from the previous political event and asked what she was doing at this interfaith event. Elizabeth explained that she was an interfaith leader, and for her it is important to show up for both. She remembers it being “very confusing to them.”

As much as contributors want to walk a line that avoids politics, I argue that participation in interfaith is a political act that is “always already entangled with the politics of representation.”³⁹⁸ Religion has always been a factor in US politics and international affairs – from wars to social movements.³⁹⁹ Nowhere has religion not been used as a weapon of politics, so why is there apprehension to use religion to fix our social situations? When the argument is made to leave religion out of politics, the result is a further politicizing of religion. In addition, when religion is blamed for various conflicts, “that have roots in other types of identities or interests”⁴⁰⁰ interfaith has an opportunity to deepen relationships and strengthen community.

³⁹⁸ Gruber, “Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak?,” 68.

³⁹⁹ Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, 4.

⁴⁰⁰ Shellard, “Liberalism and Hate Laws: Toleration Versus Tolerance,” 39.

Often, Leila feels, “our faith is used to harm us, politically.” When faith can be used as a salve, it is ignored. When it can be used to disenfranchise, sew division, and control the masses it is lauded. For this reason, Leila loathes the “discussion of faith in politics” because it always comes down to a justification of superiority.

If interfaith participants are striving for a just world, why is there an explicit objection to political discourse in institutional interfaith spaces? One reason might be a perception that religion is the “inverse of the political,”⁴⁰¹ or even apolitical, which Aikau contends is as an “invention.”⁴⁰² In other words, the idea of religion as non-political is fiction. After attending her first institutional interfaith event, Esther was inspired by what she experienced and thought “there should be more of this... great conversations, talking about our commonalities... our take on humanity. Nothing political... human issues, not political issues.” But human issues are political issues, no matter how you frame it. If the personal is political, and religion is personal, then interfaith is bound to be political. If interfaith is not political, then it cannot build deep relationships.

To build community, to work for political change, is to act out the spiritual vision of a world in which diverse communities can live together and learn from each other, each with the resources it needs to survive and mature.⁴⁰³

This is a vision of hospitality that makes hospitality a political act is taking place. “Attentiveness is a political act... attentiveness is revolutionary... caring and listening are political acts.”⁴⁰⁴ But by not making a “political stance” on any specific issue, the conversations around any number of issues can remain open, if also superficial. Rather than separating religion and politics, in an attempt to maintain a separation of ‘church and state’ which has already been

⁴⁰¹ Sands, “Chapter 12,” 310.

⁴⁰² Aikau, *A Chosen People, A Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai’i*, 19.

⁴⁰³ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, 237.

⁴⁰⁴ Adams, Carol in Alvizo and Messina, *Women Religion Revolution*.

determined to be ineffective, including “religious discourse” in the “public domain” may “inspire and strengthen moral commitments in politics... so long as what they say is translatable into a universally understandable language, one therefore accessible to nonbelievers too.”⁴⁰⁵ Still, many interfaith participants try to avoid politics, while others hope for political action.

In the 1960’s the election of John F Kennedy brought up the assumed dilemma of religion and politics. Up to this point, religion was not an issue, because those in power did not disrupt the religious (Christian) status quo. When Kennedy was asked if his Catholic beliefs would impact his ability to lead the nation he offered this politically ‘correct’ response: “Whatever one’s religion in private life may be, for the officeholder, nothing takes precedence over his oath to uphold the Constitution in all parts-including the First Amendment and the strict separation of Church and State.”⁴⁰⁶ However, the reality is that his ethical position, as influenced by his religion, would always be present.

Issues of church and state are not the same as issues of whether people can or should bring their religious values into political discussion and debate... if we can trust that the state will be truly neutral in the face of competing ethical positions, public discourse of difficult issues could be much more forthright.⁴⁰⁷

Having held positions as an interfaith president and an elected government official, Zainab’s (Muslim) offers a more realistic response as to her method of maintaining the separation of church and state. “As a political figure, I’m responding to my community. But, at night I have a higher power that I’m responding to and that’s the one I need to keep happy.” The litmus test she uses is to ask herself: “will I be able to live with myself if I do not help them?” As a political official, Zainab has a responsibility to make sure everyone “feels” that she is there to serve them, no matter what. Because of her political position, religious affiliation, and interfaith

⁴⁰⁵ Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*, 43.

⁴⁰⁶ Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, 42.

⁴⁰⁷ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What’s the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 216.

ethic, Zainab is able to bring religion into a public space in a way that is in line with the first amendment.

As much as Ida believes that interfaith work is “absolutely essential,” she is very aware of the difficulty politics creates for interfaith communities. In her experience working with religious leaders, she has become skeptical of the work institutional interfaith can do. Therefore, in Ida’s mind, the only chance interfaith has to make a social impact is through organic efforts. According to Ida it is “people of good will,” who Leila calls “peaceful warriors.” They are not the national and international leaders – who are the “heart of interfaith” that return to their communities and facilitate interfaith relationships.

Leila is motivated by an understanding that “living in a judgmental oppressive world sucks,” because, as Asma notes, the status quo harms many. Margaret recognizes that many of the activists she works with “have had some suffering in the past, otherwise they wouldn't be so connected with people who are suffering. They’ve seen it or experienced it somehow.” For example, after Rosalie was the victim of blatant antisemitism in college, she joined the Human Relations Committee on campus and show up for other groups that were being discriminated against. She reflects: “If I hadn't suffered the pain, I don't think I could empathize or identify with people who are going through similar things. And it shouldn't matter if they were Jews or not, it’s part of the human experience.” She continued: “I remember going outside and looking at the world and the world had changed for me... I was so profoundly hurt and confused.” Both Margaret and Rosalie understand that:

We are each responsible for what is happening down the street, south of the boarder or across the sea. And those of us who have more of anything – more brains, more physical strength, more political power, more money, or more spiritual energies – must give or exchange with those who don’t have these energies but may have other

things to give. It is the responsibility of some of us who tap the vast source of spiritual/political energies to help heal others.⁴⁰⁸

However, Margaret recognizes that “the more privilege you have, the harder it is to understand oppression,” which is why De La Torre critiques “the dominant culture, including liberals and progressives,” for being “willing to offer charity and maybe even drive to a march, but few are willing or able to take a serious and implicating role in dismantling the very global structures designed to privilege them at the expense of others.”⁴⁰⁹ This is the biggest grievance Johnny has of those that are religious, that they refuse to engage their religions toward positive social change. However, some of the contributors to this project have been arrested, rejected by their communities, and challenged by their families because of their political stances that are motivated by their religious interpretations. Though many critique institutional interfaith for its unwillingness and self-imposed limitations when it comes to addressing issues of social justice, individual members of interfaith communities have spearheaded events and projects to focus on racism, mental illness, domestic violence, LGBTQ rights, immigration, homelessness, antisemitism, islamophobia, transphobia and incarceration. “In a world torn by competing ideologies, ethnic strife, and economic disparity, women of faith have also come together to work for peace across racial division and religious differences.”⁴¹⁰ Those who exercise an interfaith ethic understand that material concerns are spiritual concerns and they “dominate everyday prayers.”⁴¹¹ For example, as the child of union workers, Betty is particularly concerned with economic justice. In the wake of the 2007 recession along with rising costs of living and stagnant wages, coupled with inadequate access to health care, addressing homelessness became one of the most common ways that religiously diverse people worked together. Some

⁴⁰⁸ Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.

⁴⁰⁹ De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege, Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*.

⁴¹⁰ Kwok Pui Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 208.

⁴¹¹ McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, 72.

institutional interfaith efforts such as the Crop Hunger Walk, assembling hygiene kits, participating in feeding programs, contributing to local food banks, building homes through Habitat for Humanity, participating in the homeless taskforce Point in Time count, creating a Homeless Task Force, providing services to specific populations such as women and youth, hold interfaith services and vigils to memorialize those who have died while homeless. Though some institutional efforts have been taken to address these social issues as well as immigration and refugee crises, the Covid pandemic, and racism, they stop short of advocating for political change. As Amy experienced, institutional interfaith is limited by the religious dogmas of leaders who can agree on service but can't agree on concrete solutions to eradicate the problems for fear of becoming political. However, those programs, events, and relationships that are organically formed to address social issues and bring religion into the conversation not as an afterthought or a barrier but as a motivating factor for justice, result in more curious, authentic, and hospitable communities. Therefore, those efforts that are most likely to be advocated for institutional change, take place outside of institutional interfaith efforts.

For example, Amy along with a group of mostly Episcopalians, “progressive Catholic ladies,” and “some other folks from different traditions” came together every week to hold a prayer vigil as a “public witness” to the pain being inflicted on “children who were being separated from their parents at that border.” For Gloria, who does not consider herself religious, explicitly lays out her motivations for engaging in interfaith work and attending an open and affirming church as a desire to “be involved with the fight for social justice on many different levels.” As a black woman, Jane appreciates efforts to support the black community but submits: “it should not just be about the black community, but other communities that are struggling and suffering as well. The Latino community, gay community, Muslim communities.” She continues:

“I think that's the beauty of being in the interfaith Council and especially particularly [a women's council], because I think they have more sensitivity to some of these issues.”

Emma (Humanist) also observes that an unwillingness of institutional interfaith to engage with these larger issues has hindered youth participation. She suggests that “if you can add a service component or some way for [youth] to live out their values in an activity, then they're drawn to it.” Emma argues that “young adults want to feel like they're bringing about good,” living out values, which is conceivably the same motivation for everyone that engages in interfaith spaces. They want to live their religion. In her early twenties Nellie joined Dignity, an organization that supports LGBTQ Catholics. During this time the AIDS epidemic was devastating the gay community and Dignity joined forces with Jewish and Christian LGBTQ organizations. Nellie felt that this interfaith effort was “doing good work” because “we were doing something.” However, Nellie struggled to remain in this group because of the dominance of men, as well as an overemphasis on socializing that lost sight of spirituality. I believe Naima feels something similar as she does her activist work but noticed a lack of “healing.” She clarifies that social justice work is important but is different from interfaith work because “you're starting from a place of compassion rather than urgency” of social justice work. For this reason, Nellie found herself leaving this space and being called to her indigenous roots. Here she found a spiritual salve that eventually brought her back to interfaith spaces as an indigenous leader.

Even though religion is rarely seen as a vehicle for social change, many interfaith participants are motivated by their interpretations of religion to do just that. Growing up in Minnesota, Margaret credits a “progressive Assistant Minister” for sparking her concern for justice. Likewise, Madeline attributes everything she has done to promote justice as being directly informed by her observations of injustice growing up in the segregated South. The

Baha'i philosophy to eliminate prejudice, motivates Zhang (Baha'i) and the importance of activism was instilled in Judith (Protestant) from her faith community as well. Aware of the Catholic teachings of social justice, Dorothy challenges those actions that are contrary to the principle of justice. For example, in Manila, she noticed a wall built around a church. When she questioned its purpose, she was told that The Church "didn't want the homeless people to come in." Dorothy complained then and complains now: "this is the church" and everyone should be welcomed. But this is her interpretation of what the church should do and be. It should be welcoming; it should provide refuge. So, Yuna (Muslim) questions: "How can we promote justice within our communities? How can we serve people in our communities? How can we show love to folks who are not receiving enough love or getting love from the community at large?" These are important questions that lead to difficult conversations, but cultivating an interfaith ethic of curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality makes finding the answers easier. Regardless of one's vocation, hobbies, or civic engagements, it is Yuna's position that there is always an opportunity to embed your religious and interfaith values into your life in order to have a positive impact on the world.

Example: Interfaith Witnesses

As a Shinnyo-en Buddhist priest, Teresa became involved in intentional interfaith work when she was assigned to Yorba Linda in the mid 2000's. Because Orange County and Yorba Linda in particular is known for a conservative Christian thread, she was pleasantly surprised by the thriving institutionalized interfaith work being done. In this space, interfaith allows us to see the constant push and pull of exclusive and inclusive ideals.

Ten years after 9/11 America was still struggling to find ways to engage with religious diversity. According to Hussam Ayloush, executive director of the Los Angeles chapter of the

Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), this was partially the result of public officials engaging in rhetoric that “demonizes and dehumanizes” specific groups of people.⁴¹² On February 13th 2011 U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, Congressmen Ed Royce and Gary Miller and Villa Park Councilwoman Deborah Pauly, attended a rally to protest an event in which the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) was raising funds for a women’s shelter.⁴¹³ The hatred that Eck and Patel are worried about is clearly present as Catherine describes the video she saw of the event.⁴¹⁴

When [protestors] couldn't get enough of a reaction by yelling racist, bigoted and homophobic things... actual obscenities, and just really horrible foul language... and there were children walking in with their parents, it was truly nauseating. Other invectives such as “Go home terrorist,” and “Go home and beat your wife, she needs a good beating,” as well as “One nation under God not Allah” were also recorded,⁴¹⁵ with the politicians yelling the loudest.⁴¹⁶

Incidents of prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism may be the result of fear and ignorance, in the aftermath of 9/11 Eck claimed that “Americans would not condone indiscriminate violence against neighbors of any faith or culture”.⁴¹⁷ However, in the September 2011 OC Register article,⁴¹⁸ Catherine is quoted as saying “We’ve degraded as a society. We’ve allowed hatred to spread and grow.” Those who saw the video also “saw an America in danger of losing its soul.”⁴¹⁹ Refusing to give up on the ideals of America, Catherine and the Interfaith Witnesses stand on the front lines of protecting the soul of America.

⁴¹² <https://www.pe.com/2012/08/10/ontario-pig-parts-dumped-as-muslims-pray-hate-crime-probe-urged/>

⁴¹³ CAIR email, March 3, 2011

⁴¹⁴ Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, 303.

⁴¹⁵ CAIR email, March 3, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NutFkykjmbM>

⁴¹⁶ Tamoush, 8:53.

⁴¹⁷ Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, xv.

⁴¹⁸ [Woman protests anti-Muslim rhetoric with silence – Orange County Register \(ocregister.com\)](#)

⁴¹⁹ “Woman Protests Anti-Muslim Rhetoric with Silence.”

But in these moments, Eck's hope is that "the chasms opened by hate crimes can become the sites of new bridge building".⁴²⁰ The protest at the ICNA event was one such chasm that allowed for the Interfaith Witness to build a bridge. Catherine continues her reflection:

I wasn't involved in any organization; it was just people grieving outwardly.... Everybody kept saying "somebody oughta do something about this." "CAIR, you should do something." "The Shura Council, you should do something." "The local mosque, you should do something." Everyone kept saying, "somebody oughta do something about this." And the second night, as I was drifting off to sleep – (As Catherine relates this moment, she relaxes her head back in the booth as to mimic lying in bed) – I sat up straight, and said: "Oh my God, I'm somebody! I should do something!" And so, I started thinking, what would I want? If I were walking with my kid, and there was a group of haters out there, what would I want? I would want someone to stand for me, I would want someone to get in the way of that and block them. I would want someone to try to keep my kid from hearing that. I would want someone to say, "I'll walk with you. I'll escort you. I'll take you all the way into the building". I would want someone to meet me at my car.⁴²¹

Catherine went to work, recognizing that her job was not to complain about religious prejudice, but to do something about it,⁴²² she began sending emails. First to clergy, for hierarchical support, then friends and acquaintances. Not everyone responded to her email which means, as Eck explains, "there is still a long way to go in establishing relationships of trust and respect, even among moderate, open-minded people".⁴²³ The Interfaith Witnesses are a force of non-violence⁴²⁴. When Catherine envisioned the witness line, she saw banners, signs, and complete silence creating a visual barrier against protestors that seek to threaten and harass communities of faith by sending the message that "if you're going to shout hateful slogans, you're going to have to do it across a line of people of your own faith because we refuse to be

⁴²⁰ Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, 343.

⁴²¹ Tamoush 6:38, 8:59.

⁴²² Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promins of America*, 67.

⁴²³ Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, xx.

⁴²⁴ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*.

divided”.⁴²⁵. At the beginning of each witness Catherine offers suggestions for mindfulness, meditation, and prayer so that those on the witness line can “get neutral” and be able to “withstand” the “awful, icky stuff” when “emotions start to rise.” Assuming that at least a few of the protestors have grounded their actions, and justified their hatred, with their religious worldview. While on the other hand, the Interfaith Witnesses, according their banners, are “rooted in faith, standing for love,” Signifying that their actions are justified by interpretations of the worldview that bring them to the silent line. But, the beauty of this story is that people did respond, people did show up, and they continue to show up.

Prayer

Though there seems to be a lot of contention surrounding prayer in institutional interfaith settings, and especially in civic spaces, the one space in which prayer is welcomed is at vigils and services that are organized in response to tragedies such as terrorist attacks, mass violence, or natural disasters. Most of the time these tragedies have targeted a specific religious community and the prayers are offered by the interfaith community on behalf of those specifically impacted. Moving from institutional to organic interfaith spaces prayer takes on a whole other feeling. First, through prayer almost any space can become an interfaith space. A kitchen at an interfaith event or a home sharing a meal with interfaith friends. A common phrase between interfaith friends is “I’ll pray for you.” While prayer might be one of the most challenging topics in institutional interfaith spaces and public discourse but is also one of the most accepted and appreciated gestures in interfaith relationships.

⁴²⁵ Tamoush emails.

Hearing the different perspectives and how prayer affects individual participants coming from various traditions is important. Every person, council, and event will have to make decisions as to how they will pray, and will need to be aware of the possible reactions and consequences that those choices have. Working through the challenge of prayer there are a few patterns that seem to determine if the prayer will be welcomed or cause contentions. In general, it seems that prayer is always welcomed in times of suffering. There is little resistance to prayer amongst interfaith friends. If someone is invited to an event or house of worship for a religious other, the observance of prayer is considered a cultural experience. However, in civic or public spaces such as city council meetings or schools, prayer becomes an indication that the first amendment may be violated. When prayers are offered in institutional interfaith spaces, there are fears that some might be offended, therefore constraints are put in place to stifle a full and authentic form of prayer that diverse participants might offer. And yet most of the participants share their appreciation for observing prayers of religious others. Interfaith spaces may forgo prayers that use Christian-centric language, or at the very least have non-Christians speak and pray first. The bodies of those that live their religion, when coming together with other bodies that live other religions, interfaith spaces are created. The space does not exist without them.

I love people praying... and it doesn't have to be my way. – Nellie

When Ramadan is in the summer, Teresa's windows and doors are open, and when her neighbor begins her prayers, the sound drifts through Teresa's home in the most beautiful way. When Teresa hears the call to prayer coming from her neighbors home, Teresa says: "I start my own prayer, we connect that way." Teresa has taken this a step farther by downloading her own prayer app that alerts her to the five prayers a day. When the first call goes off in the "wee hours of the morning" she texts a picture of her alter or her beads "just something to let [Elif] know

that I was praying with her at the same time. It became this way for us to be together in prayer, albeit in a different form of prayer, but at the same time, and spiritual space.”

Rachel’s has found resonance in the ‘besided-ness’ of Muslim and Jewish prayers. Having participated in multiple cohorts of Jewish and Muslim dialogues, Rachel appreciates the integrity and beauty of each tradition and by no means would ever want to “mix them,” however as providence provided an opportunity to see the traditions side by side, specifically the call and response portions of both Muslim and Jewish prayers, activating a special resonance between the two traditions for Rachel. During a break during one of the Muslim-Jewish dialogues, Rachel entered a room at the Islamic center, a Jewish participant asked if it would be appropriate and acceptable if “the Jews who were praying” could pray “next to” or beside the Muslims. She clarified that the prayers would “not be with you, but next to you, in the same room.” Rachel explains: “In Judaism you traditionally recite the prayers standing up, [while] holding your prayer book. There's a lot of movement, there’s swaying, and it's not choreographed. There are a few pieces that are choreographed. Before we say the main silent prayer we take three steps back and three steps forward. It's like you're stepping kind of into a sanctuary in that moment and put your feet together.” Throughout this process, Rachel continues “we don't touch anyone, you have space around you.” She compares this to Muslim prayers, as individuals “align themselves with one another, physically, shoulder to shoulder.” On this day in the Islamic Center, as Rachel who began The Shema, one of the most important Jewish prayers, her Muslim friend entered the space. “She just covered herself and she came over to me and just before I started to say the Shema, she put her shoulder on my shoulder. And there was a sense that she was speaking to me in her prayer language, and I was able to accept it in mine. There was something very tender and

beautiful about it.” Rachel continued: “I was starting to understand more of the words... it made everything bigger. God got bigger.”

Do you mind if we start with a prayer? – Jane

I had not met Jane before our interview, though I knew she was Mormon. Jane knew nothing about me, other than the introduction letter I had sent her, inviting her to participate in this project. After she concluded the prayer, I shared the comfort I felt because of the familiarity of the prayer. It was an affectual experience for me, that helped me resonate with what Elif would later say: “Being able to speak the same prayer language” is comforting. I realized that hearing the prayers of other faiths is very enriching and edifying, but hearing prayer from your own faith tradition has a different affect. Jane then confessed: “I honestly didn't know what your faith background was, but I thought that if you are deeply passionate about interfaith, then you wouldn't mind a prayer.” Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Reflecting on different experiences Aisha has had with prayer she remembered a poetry event at a Church in LA. “For the first time, in my life, I was at a poetry event where we were praying together... it felt very unifying... I really loved it.” As a Muslim, entering interfaith spaces that are often Christian-centric, prayers in the name of Jesus have become normal. Technically these prayers “go against” her faith, but she maintains that she is not offended because she understands “exactly where that person's coming from.” She appreciates that “in general, the prayer is going to God. In the end we're just asking for a blessing.”

Several of my friends are pastors for the Center for spiritual living. They say the most beautiful, sweet prayers, very inclusive and beautiful words, just blessing everybody, every creature, I love to hear them pray. - Mary

One of Martha's first interfaith experiences was hearing Hafsa pray in Arabic: “I didn't understand a word she said but the spirit in which she offered her prayer invoking God to bless

the [community]... that was so beautiful to me. I did not take offense to it, and she didn't say the name of Jesus Christ.” What Martha “loved” about interfaith was that she “choose not to be offended by differences” and others “should choose not to be offended” by her. But this is the position of someone who is in the majority, someone who has not been traumatized by the language of Jesu and the politics of Jesus.

However, rather than addressing the Jesus-sized elephant in the room, many institutional interfaith spaces are simply removing Jesus-language all together. It is the Mormon contributors who are the most distressed by this development. Acknowledging that “Christianity typically outweighs all of the other religions,” removing “any deity specific referencing” still drives Martha “up the wall.” In her mind, the removal of Jesus-language in prayer is proof that interfaith organizers want to “check your religion at the door and let's come in and be vanilla.” Deborah, on the other hand, reflects on all of the institutional interfaith meetings, many of which begin with a prayer, and the frustration and exclusion she feels hearing Jesus. As a Jewish person, she was grateful for a Catholic priest who she describes as a “consummate true believer,” was mindful of the Muslims, Jews, and other non-Christians in the room and “found a way to speak to everybody... No one ever thought, ‘oh boy, [he] just made Catholicism vanilla but rather, he was a Catholic, following the teachings of Christ,” by offering inclusive prayers.

“I can do Jesus, it's just language.” Being in an interfaith space every day, for a time, Ida thought she couldn't use “Jesus language” or even “God language.” These feelings are partially an acknowledgement of her Christian privilege and the overpowering presence Christianity has in society. There is a conscious avoidance that dominance being replicated in interfaith spaces. But she has since realized, since observing chaplains of other faiths, that, for example, a Muslim chaplain will simply articulate that they will be presenting a Muslim prayer. When this happens,

the audience is often curious and interested in hearing and experiencing something new. Hearing a new language – audibly and spiritually.

Other Christians, but mostly non-Mormons, are hyper aware of the privileges associated with Christianity and its dominance in interfaith spaces. There is a response of white Christian guilt that is not bad or unsurprising but leads to a desire to pacify any disagreements or discomforts. What impresses Ida (Presbyterian) is that those, like Aisha (Muslim), who are not offended by the prayers or practices of religious others, but accept them – Christian or otherwise. That does not give Christian’s license to continue to dominate the space, but a responsibility to make sure everyone feel included, authentically. As a religious and interfaith leader, Ida’s ability to ‘read the room’ is an example to follow. Prayer is sacred and communal, there are times when it needs to be personal and times when it needs to be inclusive. There have been multiple occasions when a Jewish person has thanked Ida for offering a prayer that included them. What that tells her is that there are “people who are hurting” when prayers are being offered. At the same time, she clarifies, “we can’t assume that everybody is burdened,” we just need to be aware.

Lived Religion in Interfaith Community

Ultimately, religion is about community. – Emma

Religion is a space in which “practices of reciprocity and bonds of community” can be experienced, but it is not the only space.⁴²⁶ For those that have left institutional religion, at least for a period of time, one of the things they miss is being in community. A desire for community is what pulled Gloria and Margaret back to religious spaces, but not without a dose of critique, ambivalence, creativity, and repair (which will be discussed in chapter five). For Johnny, community was found elsewhere because being in religious community wasn’t worth the trauma inflicted by the doctrines being taught.

Finding that community is the hard part. Leila was born in Puerto Rico to Palestinian parents. Eventually the family immigrated to the US, calling Los Angeles home. Finding community was a challenge for Leila. In Puerto Rico, she was an Arab Muslim. In Los Angeles, she spoke Spanish with Puerto Rican accent. At UC Irvine she joined the Latinx club because she didn’t feel accepted by the Muslim Student Association. Most of her life she has had to answer questions and correct ignorance, regardless of the community she is a part. Thus, we can see that “the construct of community holds varied and often contradictory meanings that reflect diverse and conflicting social practices.”⁴²⁷ Community, according to Joseph, should not be idealized, but justified by diversity. The “genealogy of community”⁴²⁸ according to Bhabha is a “minority discourse” meaning that community is inhabited by “the diasporic, the migrant, the

⁴²⁶ McGuire, “Sacred Place and Sacred Power: Conceptual Boundaries and the Marginalization of Religious Practices,” 72.

⁴²⁷ Collins, *Intersectionality*.

⁴²⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 330.

refugee”⁴²⁹ and the non-Christian. Thus, community is seen as “the antagonist supplement of modernity”⁴³⁰ and interfaith community is attacked as the “the antagonist supplement” of Christianity.

Interfaith communities, by definition, require difference and if those differences are repressed for the sake of unity, as we already know, radical inclusion is also suppressed. Interfaith is an example of the type of community Joseph is referring to when she suggests “collective action based on affinity rather than identity.” By negating “grand universalizing narratives,”⁴³¹ curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality guide community engagements. For example, Duncan Williams offers that relationships between Buddhist and Christians in post-WW2 America were “a combination of idealism and pragmatism” that “gave rise to various forms of interfaith cooperation.”⁴³² For example, involvement in interfaith spaces is one of the factors, according to Donna, that has allowed Jews to “succeed and thrive in America.” According to McCarthy this is because interfaith relationships are mutually beneficial. Minority or marginalized groups borrow legitimacy, while dominant groups are “protected” from “charges of elitism and insularity,” making interfaith participation a strategic, political move.⁴³³

Calling back Joseph’s argument that community should be built on affinity rather than identity leads to a conversation of bonded and bridged social capital. Intra-faith relationships create bonded social capital because they are based on identity. Interfaith relationships, however, are a form of bridged social capital based on affinity – values, morals, and resonance. An assumption is made that if there is a shared religious tradition, bonded social capital is a given. In

⁴²⁹ Bhabha, 330.

⁴³⁰ Bhabha, 330.

⁴³¹ Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*.m

⁴³² Williams, *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in Teh Second World War*, 135.

⁴³³ McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 55.

Islam for example, there is “a lot of racism,” as Betty and Mariah point out, making race a point of connection, rather than religious tradition. When Betty worked for a Muslim organization, one of her responsibilities was to pair churches with mosques in an attempt to create dialogue groups (bridged social capital). But, what Betty found is that intra-faith dialogue was needed. Having visited nearly every mosque in southern California her interfaith ethic led her to wonder how she can help people become more open. For example, how could she get the Black Muslim community to engage with the Pakistani Muslim community? Or get the Egyptian Muslim community show up? I suggest that the cultivating an interfaith ethic of curiosity, authenticity, and hospitality could make intra-faith engagements more productive. Mormon contributors have experienced similar disappointments. Which is why Joanna Brooks has written: “God, make me brave enough to love my people. How wonderful it is to have a people to love.”⁴³⁴ Expanding to this prayer, Taylor acknowledges that “the neighborhoods God has given me to love do not all call God by the same name,”⁴³⁵ or worship God the same way, regardless of faith tradition. In all of these examples it is the affect that determines community, rather than identity.

While this project spends quite a bit of time acknowledging the differences in religious identification, as an essential feature of interfaith communities, Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini point out that historically, the construction of religious communities in general have been quite “heterogeneous [and] their boundaries far more permeable, and their norms far more flexible than the political rhetoric or the state’s classificatory schemes would lead us to

⁴³⁴ Messina-Dysert, Zobair, and Levin, *Faithfully Feminist: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Feminists on Why We Stay*, 39.

⁴³⁵ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 137.

expect,”⁴³⁶ therefore creating community across religious lines might be easier than we have been told.

We can't have interfaith without community - Nellie

For some, like Dorothy, interfaith communities become like family that are “sustained by rituals of regard”⁴³⁷ such as attending baby blessings, weddings, and funerals of loved ones, sharing meals, eating frozen yogurt, and performing service. “You feel connected to people.”⁴³⁸ Community is also a place, according to Patricia Hill Collins “where people work together, share successes and struggles, and care for one another’s families.”⁴³⁹ As a community, interfaith is unique because most who enter do so out of curiosity rather than obligation. Most who enter experience a greater latitude to be religiously authentic that is not available in religious or secular spaces. In order for these communities to be hospitable, reciprocal, and for participants to exhibit humility, trust, and vulnerability. The diversity of interfaith communities offer participants both bonded and bridged social capital. Bonded capital is about remembering connection, bridged capital is about creating connection. Regardless of the type of capital, “social capital goes beyond measuring who is interacting with whom to include the characteristics and consequences of that interaction.”⁴⁴⁰ This can take the form of mourning, support, or defense of an-other. This is what Aisha has experienced, “a place of refuge for the community in difficult times.”

One of the strengths of institutional interfaith is its ability to leverage bridged social capital for individual members of interfaith communities. For example, Helen received a call from a member of the interfaith council whose son was being bullied by his soccer team because

⁴³⁶ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Secularisms*, 91.

⁴³⁷ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 229.

⁴³⁸ Ann

⁴³⁹ Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American and Islam*, 147.

⁴⁴⁰ Putnam et al., “Using Social Capital to Help Integrate Planning Theory, Research, and Practice.” 159

he was Muslim. The next morning Helen, another member of the council, and this mother were in the principal's office. While Jane was not directly involved in this event, she was aware of it. As a black woman, in a majority white community, she resonated with the experience knowing that the community doesn't "really take to outsiders." Translation: non-white, non-Christians. As Helen's friend, Jane professed that "it was unfortunate for the school district to have someone like Helen" in the corner of this Muslim family. Helen recalls that at one point the Principle and Vice Principle tried to blame the student, but eventually those that had verbally attacked their teammate admitted to the verbal assaults while attempting to defend their actions: "I am an American and I have the right to say anything I want to anybody." For Helen this was an example of a lack of religious and civic literacy.

We did not feel like we had been provided with a situation that would necessarily mean safety for [this student] or for any other child, whether it be a matter of faith, color of skin, sexual orientation, you name it. Where was the safety? Where was the understanding? Where was the kindness?

As this example demonstrates, leveraging bridged social capital isn't always easy, comfortable, or successful – but these women do it anyways. Another example comes from Gloria, whose son was on the high school football team many of the other moms had more conservative views than her and she chose to avoid certain issues like LGBTQ rights in order to fulfill the common goals of providing for the football team. With the other moms, Gloria was building a community of safety for their children, and this desire outweighed her desire to make her political positions known.⁴⁴¹ However, she also learned the importance of beginning these awkward relationships in order to become more comfortable, and eventually start to have difficult conversations. Understanding that religion can be an "emancipatory political and

⁴⁴¹ Georgis, *The Better Story: Queer Affects From the Middle East*, 16. "community is where we turn for safety especially when we are traumatized; the desires that are rendered antisocial to the community are what we must hand over for the right to belong."

cultural resource,” Gloria continues to engage in religious communities, as well as interfaith and other community efforts, though she does not consider herself religious, she is committed to “the creation of more deliberative and more participative social institutions.”⁴⁴² Similarly, being aware of the negative feelings many evangelicals have of Buddhist, when Teresa’s son was attending a pre-school at an evangelical church, she chose to keep her profession as a Buddhist priest to herself. Though she never “felt judged,” she also recognized that she was probably not in agreement with many of them on “social issues” but they could find common ground in the fact that they all cared for and loved the kids.

The key ingredient, whether building bonded or bridged capital is trust. When Fatima critiqued the Christian-Muslim dialogue program for violating her trust. When building relationships in interfaith spaces, trust allows for everyone to know where everyone else is coming from in specific religious and spiritual dialogues. The angle or agenda must be clear and cannot result in a personal attack or a criticism but must come from a place of curiosity and a desire for understanding. Joan explains that for relationships to be strengthened there has to be “enough trust” to have conversations and ask questions that do not feel like “personal attacks”. Contemplating “what our lives would be like if we knew how to cultivate awareness, to live mindfully, [and] peacefully” hooks suggests that trust would “help us build beloved community”⁴⁴³ For Joan, especially, as a white Christian, she understands that there are a lot of assumptions that someone from a minority tradition might have that would lead them to feel defensive, if trust isn’t established first, it is impossible to raise difficult questions.

⁴⁴² Dillon, “Can Post-Secular Society Tolerate Religious Differences?,” 145.

⁴⁴³ hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 223.

Chapter 5 Interfaith as a Reparative Tool

Holding an interfaith ethic of curiosity, authenticity and hospitality not only allows contributors to engage in interfaith spaces, these characteristics can also help contributors repair their relationships to religion in general. By exercising an interfaith ethic, an expansive view of religion can aid in a reparation. But this is only if, as Berlant advocates, we practice “meticulous curiosity.”⁴⁴⁴ For example, at one point Ida, an ordained minister, struggled with her faith and her denomination but she continued to feed her curiosity of different faith and worldview perspectives through her graduate work, as well as her interfaith engagements on college campuses. Though her denomination, like many religious institutions, is dominated by patriarchy it does not stop her from seeing beauty in the faith. “I just love these people. They use language that I don’t use anymore... but I know what they mean.” Rather than being triggered by the more conservative interpretations she translates them into something that makes sense for her now to make it authentic for her. She can do this because she resonates with other practitioners. “I see the depth of faith, and I see the depth of want to be of service.” This chapter analyzes interfaith as a space of repair – as a transitional space – that allows for the ‘bad’ object of religion to be repaired into a ‘good enough’ object. Critique of religion, ambivalence toward religion, creativity in living religion, and the repair of relationships to the religious object can occur as the result of interfaith engagement.

⁴⁴⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 123.

Repairing the Religious Object

*I left the doctrine and the culture. Would I rejoin the culture just for the doctrine?
I honestly can't say yes. – Johnny*

Berlant asks, “what happens when the loss of what’s not working” in Johnny’s case, religious culture “is more unbearable than the having of it.”⁴⁴⁵ In other words, what happens when the acknowledgement of pain and disappointment and trauma still leaves a desire for connection? It is cruelty to self to return to the object, but to change the object in some way, or change the orientation to it, offers optimism. If one is ‘optimistically attached’ to religion then there is an “inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way.”⁴⁴⁶ This is not an attachment to a specific religious community, though it can be, but to the promise of religion in general.

Leslie shared “I have so many friends who have been super harmed” by religion and though this conversation was over zoom, I felt the affective pain of this statement. According to Klein “unpleasant experiences and the lack of enjoyable ones... increase ambivalence, diminish trust and hope, and confirm anxieties about inner annihilation and external persecution.”⁴⁴⁷ The experiences Johnny had in church moved them away from that space, that object. Similarly, Leslie “tried very hard for very long” to remain in a religious space. While some feel that they are often ‘pushed’ out of religious space, they “chose to leave” because they were not “fully and wholly accepted” in religious spaces: “I kept trying to find a connection that wasn’t there.” Thus, we see that “we move toward and away from objects depending on how we are moved by

⁴⁴⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 27.

⁴⁴⁶ Berlant, 2.

⁴⁴⁷ Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 96.

them.”⁴⁴⁸ With that being said, the interfaith space, as a transitional object offers a different orientation. For Olivia, her “dissatisfaction” with the (religious) object’s unwillingness or inability to “go deeper” in order to “maintain the status quo” moved her away. But, she reflects: “even though I was broke, church wise, I was growing theologically and that saved me.” In other words, she shifted her orientation from the culture to the doctrine and repairs began. For Francis “religion just didn't feel good.” Having had experienced both covert and overt racism in multiple religious spaces, she was left feeling disconnected. When she found Religious Science, a space where she discovered a variety of religious traditions and began to develop an interfaith ethic, she finally “felt welcomed” and a “total rewiring,” a new orientation, began to take place.

As a transitional object, interfaith spaces do not replace religion, and for many, religion – like Klein’s mother-figure – is still very much an important object. What interfaith does do is allow the individual to build confidence that they can find God in multiple spaces, and they can be spiritual outside of the institutional religious space.⁴⁴⁹ It increases one’s capacity to be alone, without feeling alone.⁴⁵⁰ The opportunities presented by reparations allow for interpretations, survival and production that return the liberal human subject to a space that resists “social erasure.”⁴⁵¹ This is what is needed in interfaith and intra-faith work, the ability to return not in a way that rewrites, but reinterprets, not to include, but to remove that which excludes. In other words, interfaith is the transition from the dependence on the ‘home tradition’ to an independent capacity to see God in other spaces “without” the home tradition. It is not that the home tradition

⁴⁴⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 28.

⁴⁴⁹ Honig, *Public Things*, 43. “Winnicott’s objects are called “transitional” because they play a key role in transitional stages of development and because infants rely on them to make the transition from dependence on the mother-figure to more independent capacities to play without her”

⁴⁵⁰ Parker, *Winnicott and Religion*, 110.

⁴⁵¹ Eng, “Colonial Object Relations,” 6.

loses importance, but that the home tradition is no longer a hinderance or limitation to the ability to experience the divine.

This project in no way argues for a return to religion or a religious community that is the perpetrator of these harms. I do however hope to offer interfaith as a tool to repair of the object of religion in such a way that it is seen as whole – both good and bad. This, what Klein calls the depressive position, is an orientation toward religion that is the result of ambivalence and creativity. As an “anxiety-mitigating achievement” the depressive position makes it possible for an individual to ‘repair’ a ‘bad’ objects – like religion. Though Sedgwick makes clear that the repair would “not necessarily look like any preexisting whole,”⁴⁵² from the depressive position religion becomes a complex object, and “perceived as having mixed intentions.”⁴⁵³ For those that have been harmed by religion, interfaith can act as a transitional object to repair, if not the specific religious object, then the idea of religion in general. Like Anzaldua, I refuse to “glorify” those aspects of religious culture which have caused injury.⁴⁵⁴ However, I do want to work from the idea of religion as an object that is “a cluster of promises”⁴⁵⁵ that can be ‘good enough.’ Despite “our greatest disappointments and painful experiences,” Anzaldua asserts that “if we can make meaning out of them [they] can lead us toward becoming more of who we are.”⁴⁵⁶ Offering the experiences of Asian women as one example, Chung claims that interfaith dialogue facilitates in “sorting out” the “liberating elements” from the “oppressive elements”⁴⁵⁷ in their cultures and religions.

⁴⁵² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 128.

⁴⁵³ Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 90.

⁴⁵⁴ Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 44.

⁴⁵⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 16.

⁴⁵⁶ Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 68.

⁴⁵⁷ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 98.

Reflecting on those, including herself, who have been harmed by religious cultures, Aisha presents a depressive position – “I’m not going to block out all of religion just because this happened” – that orients her toward a repair of a broken relationship.⁴⁵⁸ Which is the position that Laural Thatcher Ulrich takes as she tries to see the “true values” of the LDS tradition “in spite of injustices.”⁴⁵⁹ So, while Aisha acknowledges that some are triggered by religion, she has to remind herself: “they’re lacking because they didn’t grow up in a safe space.” Similarly, Amyra shares that her “questioning relationship with religion and the construct of religion” does not negate what she sees as the “useful things to be learned from religion.” And, even more explicitly, it was “interfaith [that] allowed me to be able to see that.” Bednarowski finds that “women convey from their own experiences that good and evil, suffering and joy, are inextricably mixed together in the world. Women’s ambivalence toward their traditions has forced the recognition that women experience both suffering and healing in their traditions”⁴⁶⁰ For example, Harriet (Protestant) once described herself as a “raging-feminist” that was “triggered” by any religious space that was not inclusive and actively resisting oppression. When she first came to an interfaith space, she was able to meet “other women and people of color who were what she calls “loyal skeptics” of their faiths. It was a “really healthy” experience for her. Other contributors have found interfaith to be a space of possibility that allows for individuals to be grounded in a religious tradition while finding new orientations toward that tradition. Allowing them to remain in spaces that might become uncomfortable but still holds some goodness, that are ‘good enough’. Once Yuna (Muslim) became an interfaith organizer, she saw the opportunity to create a safe and structured space for youth to be in vulnerable positions and

⁴⁵⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 27.

⁴⁵⁹ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 27.

⁴⁶⁰ Bednarowski, 171.

process their experiences. It was the creation of a community where people felt “comfortable sharing really personal things” about their spiritual journeys, their faith traditions, their non-faith worldviews and “finding comfort in knowing that other young people were grappling with the same things.”

Klein argues that “true reparation is integral to the depressive position” and “involves facing loss and damage and making efforts to repair and restore objects internally and usually externally as well.”⁴⁶¹ In other words, for many, like Winnicott, “it is not possible... to throw away religion.”⁴⁶² So then, it becomes imperative to find what Winnicott called a ‘potential space’ or a ‘transitional object,’ what I am calling a thirdspace, to sort through “one’s inner and outer worlds, it is a place of great imaginative possibilities.”⁴⁶³ Georgis points out that this space can be any object – therefore I claim interfaith as a transitional object, a potential space, because it is a space of play where individuals feel free to be faithful and critical. As Seitz notes in his work on religious objects, “repairing religion also entails working through conflicting feelings of love and hate for the religious object.”⁴⁶⁴ One of the places this can occur is in thirdspaces where an interfaith ethic leads to productive encounters. In these interfaith spaces, love and trust can increase and fears diminish “through happy experiences.”⁴⁶⁵ Transitional objects are those that gratify, thereby enhancing “gratitude and love,” as well as “frustrates and provokes hate and paranoia”⁴⁶⁶ in an effort to repair relationships to religion, not to become religious or return to religion.

⁴⁶¹ Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 92.

⁴⁶² Parker, *Winnicott and Religion*, 69.

⁴⁶³ Parker, 123.

⁴⁶⁴ Seitz, *A House of Prayer for All People: Contesting Citizenship in a Queer Church*, 25.

⁴⁶⁵ Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 96.

⁴⁶⁶ Spillius et al., 424.

Ahmed asks us to consider what it means when objects fail? Or, to be more specific, what does it mean when religion “fails to do the work for which it was intended?”⁴⁶⁷ If religion is meant to do the work of community building, offering moral guidance, and above all to be an example of love, what does it mean when religion fails, as it often has. It has been exclusive, it has been oppressive, it has pushed people out and withheld love. Ahmed offers, “this failure might not simply be a question of the object itself failing” but “the loss of the capacity to perform an action for which the object was intended.”⁴⁶⁸ The capacity of the religious object is dependent on the people who claim to be religious, therefore the actual “failure” was “the failure of an object to extend a body, which we can define in terms of the extension of bodily capacities to perform actions.”⁴⁶⁹ Therefore, “the failure of object” is actually a “failure of subjects and objects to work together.”⁴⁷⁰ Or a “failed orientation” in which an individual or community uses the object in a way “which it was not intended.”⁴⁷¹ For some this means that religion has failed when it does not fulfill the perceived purpose of social justice. And for others it has failed when it has been used to condemn, oppress, or exploit. Interfaith offers a space for what Ananta Giri calls “transformative reconciliation” that is “animated by both compassion and confrontation”⁴⁷²

Utilizing the work of Georgis, borrowed from Winnicott, I present interfaith spaces as thirdspace of discovery and play where reparation can begin to take place. These transitional space, as Bonnie Honig describes, “are autonomous, resilient, possessed of permanence, and not prone to obsolescence, though they are not immune, either, to wear and tear.”⁴⁷³ A “play space”

⁴⁶⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 49.

⁴⁶⁸ Ahmed, 49.

⁴⁶⁹ Ahmed, 49.

⁴⁷⁰ Ahmed, 50.

⁴⁷¹ Ahmed, 51.

⁴⁷² Giri, “Cultivating Transformative Reconciliation and Striving for Peace: Compassion, Confrontation and a New Art of Integration,” 605.

⁴⁷³ Honig, *Public Things*, 43.

is one in which an individual can create and recreate relationships to the outside world in general – but religion in specific.⁴⁷⁴ These are spaces of play because orthodox expectations are muted and demands of uniformity are subdued. Because they are not religious spaces, interfaith spaces, specifically organic interfaith spaces, can “withstand the changing moods of the [individual].”⁴⁷⁵ As a transitional object, interfaith has the “ability to survive” the individual’s aggression – critiques and disappointments. And in fact, being in this space of possibility and paradox, eventually allows us to see that “we don’t need to fear Mystery’s response to our complex religious bonds”⁴⁷⁶ or the critiques and disappointments we have with religious spaces. Bidwell suggests that “Mystery isn’t threatened by, and certainly doesn’t condemn, our explorations and deviance from received tradition. Mystery seeks people who seek Mystery.”⁴⁷⁷

The psychological destruction of religion can be repaired in interfaith spaces. In this space the “capacity for spontaneous play” is increased.⁴⁷⁸ In other words, the capacity to resonate with religious others, allows us to re-orient toward religion through disorientation,⁴⁷⁹ thus aiding in a process of repair. What McGuire has found is that experiences of “intense intersubjectivity” are required to “constitute healing.”⁴⁸⁰ Andrea Gurney and Rodgers argue for a space in which the psychoanalytics and religion come together, contending that at the “core” of both object-relations and spirituality is the search “for a relationship beyond oneself.”⁴⁸¹ While Gurney and Rodgers are arguing for the importance of spirituality in therapeutic spaces, I do not suggest that interfaith can be a therapeutic space. It is however, a unique thirdspace that is neither secular or

⁴⁷⁴ Georgis, “Play and the Affective Space of Hope in Hani Abu-Assad’s *The Idol*,” 3.

⁴⁷⁵ Honig, *Public Things*, 44.

⁴⁷⁶ Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn’t Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People*, 145.

⁴⁷⁷ Bidwell, 145.

⁴⁷⁸ Georgis, “Play and the Affective Space of Hope in Hani Abu-Assad’s *The Idol*,” 3.

⁴⁷⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 5.

⁴⁸⁰ McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, 113.

⁴⁸¹ Gurney and Rodgers, “Object-Relations and Spirituality: Revisiting a Clinical Dialogue,” 965.

religiously affiliated, with the power to “facilitate reparation and reconciliation.”⁴⁸² Interfaith, as attested to by multiple contributors, is a healing space.

Interfaith has been very healing – Carole

Individuals in interfaith spaces, on some level, are willing to be uncomfortable. They are willing to grapple with certain tensions in order to find some degree of comfort. To move and grow as a person of faith, as a member of a faith community, and to connect with religious others. To apply the work of Honig, I argue that between dissociation from religion and displaced hyper-attachment to interfaith, is a healthy attachment to interfaith, for Damaris this feels like a “healing warmth rather than a burning fire.”

God⁴⁸³

Interfaith brought Margaret “back to Christianity” in some ways without claiming to be Christian. There was a time she had rejected the tradition, and the language of God and Jesus was bothersome, but she has discovered that: “I can pray and say Jesus and God” even though she no longer considers herself Christian. As Elif reflects on her struggles with Islamic cultures, she credits interfaith with saving her from “walking away.” She had internalized a culture that only seemed to give her “red tape on how to worship God” finding herself falling “out of love,” interfaith “essentially” brought God to her “in so many different ways through so many different people” she now feels “way more comfortable being Muslim.” Regardless of the space in which one learns to be curious and authentic, for many of the contributors to this project it was

⁴⁸² Gurney and Rodgers, 973.

⁴⁸³ I will use gender neutral language in referring to God, unless contributors are quoted as using gender specific language.

interfaith spaces that helped them connect to their religious traditions in ways that feel truly meaningful.⁴⁸⁴

Since this is not a theological project, I am not searching for God, but for the attachments that people have to God as a result of their attachments to other humans. This is a feminist perspective in which God is not a power “above and over us, but in and round us. Thus, I take direction from Cragg who affirms that we cannot know God in totality... but we can know God through our experiences, however partial and limited.”⁴⁸⁵

Interfaith is God in the world – Jane

If I could choose to be in an exclusive LDS group or be in an interfaith group, I'd rather be with an interfaith group. Because... I just feel more of Heavenly Father's love for all of his children, and the diversity just feels right. – Eliza

Transference: “The way in which we view a divine being shapes and influences the way we relate to other important individuals in our lives and, the way in which we view important, influential figures in our lives dictates our view of a divine being.”⁴⁸⁶ This is because, as Plaskow suggests, that our “relationship with God is mediated through community and expresses itself in community,”⁴⁸⁷ religious and otherwise. Winnicott argued that “there is no substitute for consistent, reliable care by another human being. Thus, people develop the capacity to believe, including belief in God, because of the quality of their early relational interactions.”⁴⁸⁸ For example, Elsie’s attachment to her father proved to provide her a ‘good attachment’ to God. She says: “I knew from my dad that God loved me more than anything in the world, even though he

⁴⁸⁴ Messina-Dysert, Zobair, and Levin, *Faithfully Feminist: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Feminists on Why We Stay*, 68.

⁴⁸⁵ Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

⁴⁸⁶ Gurney and Rodgers, “Object-Relations and Spirituality: Revisiting a Clinical Dialogue,” 966.

⁴⁸⁷ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*.

⁴⁸⁸ Parker, *Winnicott and Religion*, 110.

was the secular agnostic.” While “images of God may come from the past,” Zaru argues that “the reality of God is in the present.”⁴⁸⁹ Therefore, the attachments that contributors have with each other has increased and expanded their understanding of God. Zaru suggests that her “understanding of God would be much more limited if [she] had lived in isolation the other people.”⁴⁹⁰ And Taylor has come to understand that “whatever we mean when we say “God” is not fully captured by any of these traditions.”⁴⁹¹ Taylor recognizes God as a relational object rather than an object to be ‘owned’ by a single tradition⁴⁹² and Ida has shifted her theology in a way that understands God as “so much bigger than any doctrine can hold.” Francis understands God in a way that cannot be boxed, and interfaith is God’s way of proving that. Offering a playful re-orientation, Francis imagines God saying: “if you must [put me in a box], why don’t you all get in the sandbox and play together.”

Betty sees religion as “different messages that came to different people in different contexts,” and presumably in different languages. Leila describes interfaith spaces as a place where we exercise our ability to ‘hear’ those “different languages” that we use to speak to and about God. And we do this, Jane believes, because “it’s God’s intention for us to learn from everything that we encounter... to see how resilient others are, how they bring hope and joy into their lives.” Leila often hears God being used as the justification to avoid engagements with certain groups: “God would not approve.” Like when she supported the LGBTQ community. And yet, Leila believes she has been instructed by God to “be good humans and bring people closer to God.” Similarly, Helen believes God has given her the “task” to “connect people.” Elif’s interpretation of God motivates her to be in interfaith spaces and engage in interfaith

⁴⁸⁹ Zaru, *Occupied with Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks*.

⁴⁹⁰ Zaru.

⁴⁹¹ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 118.

⁴⁹² Taylor, 208.

relationships. In her opinion, regardless of your faith, it is a civic responsibility to “get to know the people in your community.” For those that do ascribe to a faith tradition that holds the belief in a creator God, then you have a responsibility to “learn about who God’s creations are.” And finally, if God is the ultimate creator, it is Elif’s opinion that whatever “barriers we build with each other... is a huge disrespect to the Creator.” Therefore every experience is an opportunity to come closer to God by, as Hoyt articulates, doing those things that center “human dignity, worth, community, and seeking out the “other.”⁴⁹³

Elif met Patricia in middle school and their conversations about God, religion, and the universe became deep and profound. Their relationship led Patricia to understand that “we all reach God in different ways,” and as Patricia and Elif began to explore not only their own faiths, but different faiths, Patricia became even more “intrigued” by “how God reaches us.” Patricia found her self considering something similar to Taylor: “Is Christian faith primarily about being Christian or becoming truly human? How does loving Jesus equip me to love those who do not love him the way I do? What do religious strangers reveal to me about God?”⁴⁹⁴ Taylor finds that “God speaks to us in three places: in scripture, in our deepest selves, and in the voice of the stranger.”⁴⁹⁵

Therefore, this project focuses on those experiences. If God is defined by experience, Chung suggests that women have affective experiences of God “in their gut... in their heart and communicating with God in their soul.”⁴⁹⁶ For Madeline, interfaith allows her to have these experiences in other spaces, to discover “God’s presence in other places.” It is a “broadening”

⁴⁹³ Hoyt, Amy in Alvizo and Messina, *Women Religion Revolution*, 27.

⁴⁹⁴ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 102.

⁴⁹⁵ Taylor, 101.

⁴⁹⁶ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*, 99.

that allows her to “see the bigness of God” and realize that God is only possible if we, according to Madeline, “know each other” and choose to “act together.” De La Torre offers an explicit example of what ‘knowing each other’ might mean, suggesting that “you cannot love the God whom you cannot see while hating your gay neighbor, your “illegal” neighbor, or your Muslim neighbor whom you can see.”⁴⁹⁷ Elif counts it as a blessing to be able to “run into God” by meeting different people. She often has conversations with God, asking what are they trying to tell her by allowing her to learn about them from all these different people and traditions.

Critique, Ambivalence, and Creativity

It seems that those who ‘do’ interfaith, have found a confidence to critique their home tradition, without leaving it. If they feel ambivalence toward specific aspects, some have created adaptations to their theology or interpretation of theology in order to remain in their home tradition. This is what Bednarowski calls the “triple task,” which consists of maintaining a “critical distance” from one’s community, while conserving the “deepest insights” one can gain, and imagine and construct “new visions by combining a tradition’s insights with revelations that come from many places in the culture.”⁴⁹⁸ I argue that interfaith is a space in which this triple task is accomplished because of its distance from the institution of religion itself, its desire to find the good in religion, and its ability to bring participants in contact with other traditions that can inspire.

As this project centers women and nonbinary folks, the use of critique, ambivalence, and creativity is necessary for those who are marginalized within their own communities to remain in

⁴⁹⁷ De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege, Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*.

⁴⁹⁸ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 20.

religious spaces. Chung suggests that there is a “self-awakening and self-affirmation” to be achieved “through critical reflection and creativity,”⁴⁹⁹ interfaith becomes a safe place to do this work amongst others that are doing the same. Many are affectively tied to their traditions, and do not want to leave, but need to find a way to stay. In critiquing traditions, most take issue with culture more than doctrine. As critiques were levied against traditions, contributors also wanted me to know that they loved their tradition. Demonstrating the work that many have done to see religion, and their traditions in particular, as ‘good enough’ objects. Like Taylor, they “will continue to ask much of [their] tradition.”⁵⁰⁰

I hope all day long I'm accused of being a Latter Day Saint, and when I hope that I'm equally accused of being different than other latter-day saints... I'm not bashing on the gospel; I'm frustrated with the culture – Martha

I love my faith but there were a lot of cultural things that I associated with my faith when I was young that I resented. – Leila

As these statements exemplify, and as Gross helps to articulate, “critique is rarely about the beliefs, but about how the community holds the beliefs.”⁵⁰¹ For example, Ghandi is quoted as saying: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians” to which Betty adds the an assessment that “conservative Christians would really hate Jesus.” None of this means that contributors are, as Sally clarifies, “not supportive of [their] faith,” but have a healthy critique. As Kaur reminds us: “There are no true or false interpretations” of religion, “there are only those that destroy the world we want and those that create it. We get to decide which ones to hold in our hearts.”⁵⁰² It seems, however, that Christians have more latitude to openly critique the culture since they are not experiencing the same external threats that many non-Christians face.

⁴⁹⁹ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 44.

⁵⁰⁰ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 184.

⁵⁰¹ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What's the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 218.

⁵⁰² Kaur, Valarie, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, 26.

What Asma (Muslim) assesses as the luxury of majority communities to not only nitpick about doctrinal issues, and scriptural interpretations, the luxury of fighting over the bit that they disagree with. Whereas minority groups, for their survival, have to build solidarity based on the majority that they have in common. Thus, many religious minority groups (read: Non-Christian) ‘do’ interfaith with the desire of being understood, as well as understanding. As minorities they do not have “the luxury of disagreeing with each other,” therefore, non-Christian religious groups in America that seem to find ways of overcoming their differences in order to create inter-group solidarity. Solidarity might not always last, because incommensurability is a reality, but does not stop engagement to a positive end.

In addition to being critical, they are also ambivalent and creative as they engage with their communities. Like Taylor, they try to help their communities “expand their thinking without blowing their minds” and correct the misinformation “they have been told about people of other faiths without causing them to distrust their own families of faith”⁵⁰³ of home traditions. Issues of conservatism, patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, imperialism, just to name a few, are observed in most traditions – even the most progressive traditions.⁵⁰⁴ It is Aisha’s observation that “faith-based spaces are not putting in the effort to get to the bottom of the issues.” And De La Torre would agree. As he condemns churches for being “bastions of indifference and fortresses of the noncommittal.”⁵⁰⁵ I argue that institutional interfaith spaces are as well. At the same time, because interfaith is not beholden to an institutionalized belief system, Aisha (Muslim) suggests there is hope felt when multiple people from diverse faith traditions offer the same critiques. Imagining what this would look like, Aisha envisions a more organic

⁵⁰³ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 26.

⁵⁰⁴ Yoffie, “Why Interfaith Dialogue Doesn’t Work -- And What We Can Do About It | HuffPost.”

⁵⁰⁵ De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege, Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*.

gathering of “faith loving women” as well as those who have been traumatized by religious cultures, who are willing to address a topic, acknowledge harms, and appreciate pain. I wonder if this would be a ‘good enough’ transitional space of healing. Bidwell suggests that “When religious tradition harms someone, that person takes precedence over the integrity of the tradition... People need more care than traditions do.”⁵⁰⁶ Interfaith might be a space where this could happen.

Using Ahmed’s logic that “lines” or traditions “are both created by being followed and are followed by being created.”⁵⁰⁷ I take a moment to consider how traditions arrived at these points of harm and trauma. By following lines, or traditions, “we become committed to “what” they lead us to as well as “where” they take us.”⁵⁰⁸ To critique the line, or the tradition, is to critique our own actions. To acknowledge harm and trauma, is to acknowledge our part in it. To question where the line, the tradition, is leading us (in this life or the next) is to question our actions. The desire for comfort and security lead to a deeper commitment to an unexamined line. However, “to follow a line takes time, energy, and resources” so when the line becomes difficult or uncomfortable one must make a choice to leave it all together or make changes to how the line, the tradition, will be followed. Remembering that “what we do do opens up and expand some capacities” while possibly restricting others.⁵⁰⁹ Women and non-binary folks who choose “to stay within their religious traditions on their own terms” as well as participate in interfaith spaces which may alienate them “from parts of their faith community.”⁵¹⁰ The new lines that they create depart from tradition in some ways, making it hard for others to accept.

⁵⁰⁶ Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn’t Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People*, 146.

⁵⁰⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 16.

⁵⁰⁸ Ahmed, 17.

⁵⁰⁹ Ahmed, 60.

⁵¹⁰ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 30.

Most contributors critique their traditions because they love their tradition. They love the doctrine, the people, and the spaces. They are also ambivalent toward certain aspects of the tradition because they love the tradition.⁵¹¹ Ambivalence is an act of agency that occurs, according to Carolyn Rouse, “when there is a disconnect between [one’s] common-sense view of the world and the community’s exegesis.”⁵¹² In other words, ambivalence is a feeling of paradox “grounded in a deep sense of belonging, familiarity, and commitment and an equally strong sense of alienation and distrust.”⁵¹³ Ambivalence then can be seen as a coping mechanism implemented when devotion to beliefs run up against the communities that hold those beliefs in different ways.⁵¹⁴ Ambivalence can manifest itself in a variety of ways, for example, Wilfried Decoo acknowledges that “some Mormons play the accepted deferential role toward church authorities, while quietly doing some things ‘their own way’.”⁵¹⁵ In articulating the ways Muslim women demonstrate ambivalence, Rouse explains that some increase their knowledge of religious traditions and doctrines, “in order to reinterpret” them. Many of the contributors to this project are working to “broaden and deepen, reform and revitalize, the theological worldviews of their communities from both inside and outside.”⁵¹⁶ All of this being said, ambivalence is not a manifestation of a crisis, but of faith. It is a willingness to grapple with the doctrines and adapt them “to meet personal challenges.”⁵¹⁷ When ambivalence is cultivated as a virtue, rather than a vice, Bednarowski argues, women become the consciousness of the community, raising awareness when exclusions or distortions are taking place, as well as encouraging “new

⁵¹¹ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, 178.

⁵¹² Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American and Islam*, 178.

⁵¹³ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 19.

⁵¹⁴ Bednarowski, 7.

⁵¹⁵ Decoo, “In Search of Mormon Identity: Mormon Culture, Gospel Culture, and an American Worldwide Church,” 36.

⁵¹⁶ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 188.

⁵¹⁷ Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American and Islam*, 178.

possibilities” for “reform or transform” by bringing the “traditions’ most liberating and healing insights”⁵¹⁸ to light. Because women and non-binary folks are marginalized in most traditions, creativity becomes a necessity. But Richard Rohr also believes ambivalence to be an auspicious position, not rebellious or antisocial, but advantageous because “we are free from its central seductions, and we are also free to hear its core message in creative ways.”⁵¹⁹ Thus, thirdspace is a space of ambivalence, a space of creativity.

Creativity is born out of ambivalence. And, as Georgis suggests, “queer hope rooted in our capacity for creativity.” Thus queer hope applied to religion may lead to resistance but also to repair. Even as creativity is implemented, most “retain the symbols, rituals, teachings, and much of the language of their particular communities,”⁵²⁰ of their ‘home traditions.’ Emma began critiquing Catholicism as a teen, but it wasn’t until college when Emma entered an interfaith space and found a way to claim her humanist identity, and still honor her Catholic roots. Interfaith was an opportunity to break free of boxes and labels and discover creative ways to be authentic.

While critique, ambivalence, and creativity may help individuals “develop stronger connections with their faith, it does not always help them develop stronger connections with the faith community.”⁵²¹ For example, as religion has been politicized, members of Elizabeth’s (Mormon) congregation refuse to talk to her and question her interfaith participation. Martha (Mormon) has had the reoccurring experience of people from her congregation asking: “Aren't

⁵¹⁸ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 20.

⁵¹⁹ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 217. And October 11, 2022 [Richard Rohr on Twitter: "When we live on the edge of anything, with respect and honor \(this is crucial!\), we are in an advantageous position. We are free from its central seductions, and we are also free to hear its core message in creative ways. #DailyMeditations https://t.co/NJAPR8EtoV" / Twitter](https://t.co/NJAPR8EtoV)

⁵²⁰ Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 1.

⁵²¹ Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American and Islam*, 178.

you embarrassed to be associated with this or that?” To which she thinks: “Aren't you embarrassed not to be?” Martha believes: “at the end of the day we are called to do two things to love the Lord and love our brothers and sisters.” Similarly, Helen (Christian) received letters of rebuke from members of her community after inviting the interfaith community to participate in a Christian celebration. As these examples illustrate, interfaith participation does create, on some level, a disconnect between contributors and their faith community as they reinterpret, repair, and reclaim their relationship to their ‘home tradition.’

Spiritual Maturity

There is a point in faith development when, according to Ida, people start to “break down particular images of God.” The process of “maturation is... closely linked to loss and mourning,”⁵²² spiritual maturation acknowledges the “contradictions of the sacred and the complexity of life... as well as the positive and negative aspects of the spiritual tradition.”⁵²³ Because, as Klein clarifies, mourning is the manifestation of love,⁵²⁴ spiritual maturation is a deepening, if also changing, of that love. “Developmentally this ability to love and be concerned is necessary for the integrity and stability of the self.”⁵²⁵ In other words, in order for an individual to love their ‘home tradition’ and have a relationship with God, they must feel safe and supported. There is a difference between those that are performatively religious and those who are “really religious,” or spiritually mature. While truth claims are important, it seems more likely for someone to accept “your truth is true for you, and mine is true for me.”⁵²⁶ Spiritually

⁵²² Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 84.

⁵²³ Gurney and Rodgers, “Object-Relations and Spirituality: Revisiting a Clinical Dialogue,” 974.

⁵²⁴ Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 91.

⁵²⁵ Spillius et al., 87.

⁵²⁶ Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 77.

mature individuals have confidence in a God that is bigger than socially constructed differences, but honor diversity as central to identity. For example, like many who come from non-Christian traditions, whether immigrants or the children of immigrants, or non-white, contributors were raised to be proud of all of their identities. However, it is not enough to be grounded in a faith tradition, contributors also point to the importance of feeling supported as they asked questions and raised concerns of their faith community.

Our [Sikh] scripture itself is interfaith. - Sahib

I have found [Hinduism] to be the most tolerant of all religions. - Savitri

While this project does not view those that participate in interfaith spaces, or hold an interfaith ethic, as spiritually superior to those that do not, many contributors do see interfaith participation as evidence of spiritual maturity. Both Bidwell and members of *The Faith Club* found, religion is a tool that can “facilitate our relationship with Mystery and with each other”⁵²⁷ as well as “enhance, expand, and promote the proximity and presence of God in [one’s] earthly life.”⁵²⁸ Now, how we use that tool, that language, as Gross points out, “does not really tell us about God, but it does tell us a considerable amount about those who use the God language.”⁵²⁹ So then when we are talking about God, across religious boundaries, it is how we translate and interpret that language that colors our experiences. Kala notes the challenges that most religious people have with indigenous teachings. Considering that indigenous traditions do not have a ‘book,’ the orality of the tradition often seems to be discredited and therefore opportunities for spiritual learning are limited. ‘The Book,’ defined as any religious or sacred text such as the

⁵²⁷ Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn’t Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People*, 146.

⁵²⁸ Idliby, Oliver, and Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, and A Jew - Three Women Search for Understanding*, 213.

⁵²⁹ Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*.

Torah, the Bible, the Quran, or the Guru Granth Sahib are, as Kala has observed, can be a limitation to curiosity, but by reading it with an interfaith ethic it can lead to both creativity and ambivalence.

According to Gross, “a spiritually mature religious practitioner is flexible, not rigid, in her stand toward newfound information, even if that information is disconcerting.”⁵³⁰ Offering a similar definition, Elif shares that one’s relationship with religion “should not be rigid [but] flexible [and] ongoing and evolving and spiritually deep diving, nonstop. You don’t stay in shallow waters; you’re constantly exploring a religion that is like the ocean.” But, this spiritual maturity is the result of feeling safe in one’s own tradition and trusting that diverse encounters will not destroy the self. All members of *The Faith Club* exhibit spiritual maturity, and Suzanne articulates her own as she shares: “It was through my own discussions with a Muslim and a Jew that I was beginning to understand my Christian soul in a way I never had before.... Every assumption was up for examination and debate.”⁵³¹ Priscilla also shares: “I wouldn’t have the faith I now have if I hadn’t sat through the most difficult, intimate, challenging conversations of my life with Ranya and Suzanne”⁵³² Another example comes from Mariah who shares her awareness of being “brainwashed” to believe certain things like: those who are not Muslim are ‘infidels.’ While she no longer subscribes to this belief, she knows that there are some, even in interfaith, that do. She knows that they love interfaith and that “they love their relationships. They love people from other faiths... but still genuinely believe that others are infidels.” This same affect is felt in my observations of Mormons who participate in interfaith spaces. There is a sincere and genuine love that is felt for religious others with a simultaneous desire for their

⁵³⁰ Gross, *Religious Diversity - What’s the Problem?: Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, 7.

⁵³¹ Idliby, Oliver, and Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, and A Jew - Three Women Search for Understanding*, 217.

⁵³² Idliby, Oliver, and Warner, 158.

acceptance of the ‘truth,’ as defined by Mormon doctrine. Through questioning and experience Mariah has “eliminated” certain interpretations from her memory: “I don’t believe that anymore.” Her spiritual maturity appears as her interpretations are questioned and critiqued by family members who claim she can’t change a doctrinal interpretation. Mariah’s response: “yes, I can.” In this reply Mariah is exercising a “critical reexamination of received religious instruction” which is the result of “the recognition of the multiple spiritual traditions”⁵³³ she has encountered in interfaith spaces. While she does not practice these other traditions, she engages in a thirdspace – a *spiritual mestizaje* – that informs her life on the border between her religion and others, her “ability to imagine new ways of both apprehending and honoring the sacred in daily life”⁵³⁴ is the result of an interfaith ethic. I contend that a majority of the women and non-binary folks of this project ‘dwell’ on the borderlands of their faith. Which means that they cross religious boundaries, “without denying one’s own tradition”⁵³⁵ requiring a level of spiritual maturity. Therefore, cultivating spiritual maturity is imperative to withstand the discomfort that is inevitable in spaces of radical inclusion.

Interfaith work is both a desire to seek out and understand and honor peoples and an expression of my own – at the same time. – Yael

Interfaith is not just about learning of other’s tradition, it’s about learning of your own. I learn new things about different perspectives to Judaism all the time. In these circles you are constantly learning about yourself, which is really what it means to learn about others. – Miriam

I think ultimately interfaith work requires you to be an expert on yourself. – Emma

When I spend time listening to people who are speaking from their deepest wisdom, I can feel understanding, inspiration, and energy nourish the root of my own wisdom. But I must not lose myself at the feet of others. My most vigilant spiritual practice is finding the seconds of solitude to get quiet enough to hear the Wise Woman in me.⁵³⁶

⁵³³ Delgado, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative*, 14.

⁵³⁴ Delgado, 14.

⁵³⁵ Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

⁵³⁶ Kaur, Valarie, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, 281.

Contributors to this project are in agreement that “one must not need to give up one’s own particular religious and theological identity in order to embrace other identities.”⁵³⁷ In fact, for Francis someone involved in interfaith is “evolved,” compared to those “who are entrenched in their thinking.” It is her observation that interfaith participants understand the word “connection” and understanding “that’s really what God wants us to do, to feel connection,” to be connected. For Elif the social push back from the Muslim community, when she has tried to enter that space has been difficult. So, she says, “I’ll go where people are willing [to listen]. I like to find people who are enlightened and have grown and are evolving and constantly educating themselves... I think within interfaith spaces, there are opportunities to find the people that are like minded.” These are individuals that, according to Asma, are not determined to leave an interfaith encounter the same, but are willing and open to the possibilities of being changed by the interaction. This does not mean that they expect others to change, but they, themselves, are willing to be affected.

One critique that can be levied against institutional interfaith spaces is that they are not always occupied by spiritually mature people. In most interfaith spaces the inability to address incommensurability is an indication of a lack of spiritual maturity. Some avoid interfaith because they feel they need to be more grounded in their own faith rather than learning about other faiths, Harriet recognizes that there are those “who explicitly avoid [interfaith] as a means of staying true to their faith.” But many of the contributors would agree with Jane, that there are “so many beautiful things [that] come into our lives when we seek to educate ourselves about others.” In fact, Martha knows that there are “a lot of parents” who are worried about their kids participating in interfaith spaces and events. But what she, and many of the other contributors, have found is

⁵³⁷ Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*.

that interfaith often makes them more committed, “they have a deeper conviction of their faith then when they started because they’ve learned about other people's faiths... but it also solidified in their heart some of the things that they had learned and knew to be true.”

Multiple contributors address the fear that interfaith will somehow change a person’s beliefs or entice them to convert to another religion. Noticing a reluctance in the Muslim community as well, Hafsa (Muslim) shares the concern that “introducing interfaith” too early will confuse youth. The argument for limiting “exposure to other religions” is that “it is simply too confusing to dabble in too many different belief systems.”⁵³⁸ The assumption that Islam is seen as “too hard” compared to Christianity or another tradition will lead youth to want to “switch.” Even if ‘switching’ doesn’t happen, “picking and choosing from various traditions leave too much room for feelings, whims, and simply taking what suits one’s self-interest.”⁵³⁹ Considering all religions have their challenging doctrines and difficult expectations, the fear of conversion because of interfaith seems to be overblown. Especially because not a single contributor to this project has personally experienced or witnesses religious switching or conversion as the result of interfaith participation.

If meeting a Muslim teen makes my Jewish kid become Muslim, either the Jewish kids was meant to be Muslim and there’s nothing wrong with that, Or I didn’t do my job right to begin with and I didn’t make them feel connected enough to their own Judaism – Yael

Living in a diverse society, Donna raises a question for Jews: “what happens if we spend too much time on the other team?” Conceding that Jews are “very worried about assimilation” and fear that “too much engagement with other faiths is going to give our young people another reason to not be Jewish.” This understanding explains why Rachel finds it difficult to get the

⁵³⁸ Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 153.

⁵³⁹ Wuthnow, 153.

Jewish community to support institutional interfaith efforts because “they don’t understand that interfaith work actually strengthens identity.” In addition Christian Smith argues, “pluralism might even strengthen belief.”⁵⁴⁰ Coming from a minority tradition, Amyra’s parents were skeptical of her interfaith involvement, and even she was nervous to attend her first interfaith event. But what she experienced was finally “being able to talk about myself and to put all these thoughts that I had in my head, and all these things that I had talked about in my Sunday classes and to actually share with people who weren’t of the same background as me” and for them to “actually be interested.” Similarly, Rachel observed that the Muslim and Jewish high school students she worked with “actually strengthen their identity by having to explain their identity” in interfaith spaces. Many contributors agree and find that interfaith serves to strengthen and deepen their own faith. Why and how does this happen? Wuthnow suggests it is because “Seeing people with different habits and lifestyles makes it harder to practice our own unreflectively.”⁵⁴¹ This has led Mary to make connections to, with, and between her own beliefs. The women of *The Faith Club* discovered that “when you’re asked about your faith by people who have different beliefs, you’re forced to examine your faith in a way you never did before. You reconsider your beliefs in a new context. You keep some, change some, and throw some out. And in the process, you take ownership of your religion.”⁵⁴²

When you are in the same environment, your same tribe and community, there's no challenge, you're not challenged in your faith. – Zaha

One of the key guidelines to interfaith engagement is an emphasis on personal experience and interpretations, recognizing that even within a religious tradition, individuals will have

⁵⁴⁰ Ammerman, “The Challenges of Pluralism: Locating Religion in a World of Diversity,” 155.

⁵⁴¹ Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*. 3

⁵⁴² Idliby, Oliver, and Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, and A Jew - Three Women Search for Understanding*, 257.

differing interpretations of doctrines. One of the benefits of interfaith that Sahib has experienced is that of learning about her own faith. When she is asked to teach about her tradition in interfaith spaces, “it forces [her] to really learn the topic” she continues: “I’ve learned a whole lot about Sikhi over the years because I’ve gotten questions that I would not have considered or hadn’t delved into or been introspective about.” Similarly, Zaha has been asked questions “nobody from [her] own community will ask.” These have compelled her “find the answer from the Quran” and “read more.” The result: “I’m reading to get the benefit of the spirituality of reading the Quran.”⁵⁴³ By learning about other religions, Mary has found that her own religion and her own life has been “enhanced and almost supplemented” by religious others. In the process of engaging with people of other religions she shares “I came to understand my own beliefs better through the eyes of others.” For example, in the process of fasting during the month of Ramadan, Mary shares:

I came to understand fasting in a totally different light. It was the same belief, but we looked at it from different perspectives... It's like all these principles I've grown up with, the idea of charity, or tithing, or fasting or Sabbath, but [interfaith friends] gave me a perspective... it's kind of like looking at a coin, you see the face of it. But interfaith for me has helped me kind of to see the other side of it, you know, I still have the same coin. But it's from a different perspective.

The connection and resonance that occurs for Mary, and others that participate in the practices of religious others, builds and deepens understandings. These ‘principles’ that are expanded through interfaith engagements do not make interfaith participants less religious but more spiritual.

⁵⁴³ Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*, 311. “learning more about other religions will be richly rewarding... most will probably discover within themselves a deeper desire to understanding their own faith.”

Response-ability

This leads me to consider the responsibilities contributors have internalized based on their relationship to God. Asking, as Zaru does, “not only what we can learn about one another, but what we learn from each other about God and our relationship with God.”⁵⁴⁴ According to Helen, interfaith not only provides these answers, but a “higher level of understanding how God wants us to be.” Zaha, who has a practice of not only reading the Quran, but the Bible as well, speaks to what she sees the benefit of interfaith education. She shares: “when my Muslim community says something negative about Christians, I know what to say. I know how to answer. I know my Bible, and I can eliminate any wrong information.” Being able to go back to one’s own community to correct misconceptions is an important duty of those operating from an interfaith ethic.

Zaha shares the concern that communities only defend their own – “Muslims defending Muslims” – but Zaha wants Muslims to defend Christians, and “Christians to defend Muslims.” As interfaith leaders, many contributors offer examples of doing just this. When Yael hears somebody denigrating Muslims, she is compelled to say: “that woman is my sister, and you can’t talk about her that way.” In this same vein she also hopes that when Christians, who engage in interfaith programs, “hear people talking about how Jews and Muslims are going to hell,” they feel responsible to speak up because “it’s not enough to think [they are wrong or that you should speak up] you have to actually do it.” Articulating an Islamic teaching, Leila explains: When faced with an injustice, the first priority is to act in such a way that will alleviate that injustice. If, for whatever reason, one cannot act because it is not safe or one is not capable, you are expected

⁵⁴⁴ Zaru, *Occupied with Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks*.

to speak against the injustice. And finally, as a last resort, if you cannot speak you at the very least are called upon to pray. But, as Leila explains, “what Allah prefers is for us to act.” She then critiques society for often doing the opposite. “We only act under extreme circumstances or if it serves us, not when someone else is hurting.” As Elif explains, her friendship with Teresa has motivated her, as a Muslim, to immerse herself in understanding Buddhism. “I have so much respect and a little bit more knowledge of who they are, so it makes me want to protect them, and love them.” For Johnny, who rarely encounters religious others except for in interfaith spaces, they have discovered it is possible to connect with religious people and build relationships that are not solely focused on religion. For Leslie, “interfaith is a way of meeting new and different people who are not just their religion.” They have also discovered that you are more likely to “question other people's dismissal or stereotypes about religion when you know someone of that religion.” For example, they shared: “If anyone says anything about Mormonism I can be like. That's cool, but also have you met a Mormon person?”

Leila articulates that interfaith relationships are built when we show up to lunch or grab coffee, but they are put into action when we stand up for someone in another community who has “lost their rights or was treated unfairly.” Interfaith relationships are leveraged when we are willing to “stand up with them, right next to them, even though you don't completely comprehend them.” It is not just that Zhang better understands her Baha’i faith because of interfaith engagements, but because of her engagement in interfaith spaces, she can enter Baha’i spaces and share her understandings of various religious traditions in order to help other Baha’is to irradicate their ignorance.

I think that's all... interfaith work is. And I might go as far as to say that I think that might be all, life really is, you suit up and you show up. You do what you say you're going to do. And if you say, I will be there for you, then you just walk right out there

and be there for them. That's all it takes. It turns out, that's all it takes to change the world. – Catherine

While curiosity is a characteristic of an interfaith ethic, it is only the beginning.

Participating in difficult conversations is the practice of interfaith work. Being willing to push back against comments made in ignorance or intolerance takes practice, but as Deborah has found, the more you do it the more nimble you get. You become more comfortable with acknowledging experiences while also questioning generalizations. That is the real work of relationship building.

It is part of my responsibility as a Jewish person to fight Islamophobia. Specifically, as a religious Jewish person. Just because of how similar they are, and the fact that Jews should understand how it feels to be marginalized and what the consequences of that can be. I think knowing it and feeling it the way that I do now, are a little bit different. – Yael

Taking on the response-ability as Jakobsen articulates, of addressing prejudice and stereotypes “is not a moral perspective, but a language of interaction, it allows for recognition of partiality and openness to others without having to protect its coherence... Response-ability names the on-going process of working to resist and contest dominations and the responsibility of producing new norms and articulating democratic values under conditions of constraint.”⁵⁴⁵ Response-ability therefore is to recognize that offense and conflict are inevitable, but also “natural” as Rachel points out. It is then our responsibility to choose to extend grace, and accept grace, so that we are not stuck. In relationship there is an opportunity to say, as Deborah does, “wait, did I just say something that was not cool?” Knowing that “you are in the company of people who will hear it and understand it in the spirit in which you meant it.” Rather than avoid conflict, taking the opportunity to have these difficult and uncomfortable conversations is proof that the relationship is strong. Relationships allow for hard questions to be asked and difficult

⁵⁴⁵ Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics*, 172.

conversations to be had. Over the years, facilitating dialogues between Muslims and Jews, Rachel understands that her work would not be successful without relationship.

Because many see religion as a “horribly divisive force,” Deborah sees interfaith as a space of connection. In organic interfaith spaces the ‘smallest encounters’ offer hope. Deborah explains that in most spaces “we’re not supposed to talk about religion and politics.” These topics have become so heated and “people are so freaked out that they’re going to misstep” so the topics are avoided all together. But in her experience, the “talking about it” is what alleviates fear because everyone gains more understanding, when grace is extended. Elif recognizes that “even the smallest cup of coffee could be offensive”⁵⁴⁶ and we have to be mindful of that. But it also provides the opportunity to accept grace, which Elif has since “adopted from [her] Christian family.”

As discussed in chapter three, when connection is built on shared commitment to the community, or on the same politics, or moral standards, then the religious tradition becomes something to understand rather than fear. At a gathering of Muslim women that Zaha hosted in her home, someone asked a question about Mormonism. Because of Zaha’s knowledge, relationships, and understanding, she was able to answer the questions and then went to her library to retrieve a copy of The Book of Mormon. Zaha remembers that this woman, as well as the other women in attendance, seemed surprised that she had this book in her possession. “As I looked at the eyes of my own community, I felt like I was able to make a difference.” She imagined that these women might have thought “wow, if she has one, we can have one. If she is reading it, we can read it, right?” The example that Zaha hopes to be setting for her faith community is that nothing is off limits, anyone can build interfaith relationships and gain greater

⁵⁴⁶ Valentina brought coffee into a Mormon church which has a prohibition on drinking coffee.

understanding. Shaheen's hope is that those religious others that she engages with will not say "I know that one good Muslim, but that it translates into shifting the way they look at anyone they see at the grocery store wearing Hijab." Teresa shares in these hopes and has found that "direct interaction" was the best antidote for destroying stereotypes. "I'm hoping that I can express my faith in a way where they will say, I know a Buddhist and she was part of our community for years, and just like us she loved our children and served our community."

Future

When my mom and I leave interfaith events, we have faith in the world. We don't have to stress; God has got this covered. – Aisha

Shaheen hopes that "interfaith will prove itself by our actions to show that people who are devout to their own faith tradition can still engage together and make this world a better place." Feeling more like an "outsider looking in" Kala is still able to see interfaith for what it is meant to be, "good hearted people that are deeply rooted in these old religions, but willing to open their mind to say, ours is not the only way... it makes me feel good to think that people would be willing to cross those lines, and to open their doors and accept others that are not thinking the same way as you." Which Fatima agrees with however, she also believes that interfaith should do more to cultivate tangible skills. One explicit example of the ability of institutional interfaith to aid in the cultivation of tangible skills is offered by Amyra who reflected on her participation in institutional interfaith events throughout high school, she expresses the ways in which being part of these spaces, even for just a few hours at a time, has impacted her life.

Beyond just introducing me to people of different religions, [interfaith] introduced me to different social issues... Beyond just talking about people's faiths, it's a good starting point to talk about people's different backgrounds and to actually put those differences in the forefront. Accepting how these differences are a strength within

us, how these differences are also connected within the values that we all have, to be able to talk about more current issues, and to be taught how to talk about issues that are maybe connected to my being an immigrant, [and] my experiences as an Iranian... I think that space was really useful in bringing up these other issues and engaging youth and talking about them, I definitely would be a different person if I wasn't involved.

As demonstrated through the examples in this project, those who have cultivated an interfaith ethic, in thirdspace, have developed “the agility to navigate and challenge monocultural and monolingual conceptions of social reality,”⁵⁴⁷ especially a Christian reality. But, beyond religion, Abigail sees the benefit of interfaith as “bigger than religion or spirituality or worldviews that these are these are life skills that make you a better human.” She has experienced the ability of interfaith to acknowledge intersecting identities, to listen and engage in civil dialogue, and to appreciate someone that is different than you, all skills which can be applied to situations beyond interfaith. Because as Johnny articulates, “if we’re just here for religion, it ends up dying.” To which Donna adds that interfaith provides her with “a guide to living life as a human in a diverse world.” And Asma suggests that these skills “make you a better family member, [and] applies in so many other places,” including one’s own faith community. In fact, Elif believes that interfaith hasn’t made her “less of a Muslim,” if anything, she says: “it has made me more of a human.” As a non-religious person, Leslie sees interfaith as a space where people are possibly more willing to learn about “a plethora of other aspects of peoples identities.” For example, as Leslie contends, as a non-religious person:

I just feel like interfaith is, for some people, a way to get their foot in the door to accepting other people's way of life. And so, if you become familiar with another person's religion, it helps you kind of see them beyond that. I feel like if you can see the similarities between you and someone of another faith you can probably see the similarities between you and someone of another race, and someone of another sexual identity.

⁵⁴⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 7.

This willingness to see someone else as multidimensional is the interfaith ethic at work. A willingness to see past religion, to be curious about identities beyond religion. Yael argues that “once you can learn about, recognize, respect, and accept people of another religion you can do the same for people of another race and people of another economic strata... to really recognize and honor everybody's humanity.” Supporting this optimism, Asma has noticed her own willingness and desire to engage with those who are different from her, in other areas of her life, in and out of her faith community.

And yet, “there is an abundant amount of ‘bridging’ left to be done.”⁵⁴⁸ For those that critique interfaith as idealistic, Rabbi Hirschfield asks: “If religion and spirit and faith don’t make you idealistic, what’s the point?” This does not mean that we are naïve, “which is a very dangerous thing to be in this world” but that we “recognizes the difference between how things are and how they could be.”⁵⁴⁹ Interfaith gives us a glimpse of that world.

*Some people say to me, there will come a day when we'll all have the same belief.
I say: 'please, I don't want to see that day.' – Rosalie*

I don’t want to see that day either. In returning to Mariah’s question: What is my goal with interfaith? Following Berlant’s caution, I want to guard against the overestimation of the power of interfaith while also admitting that interfaith spaces can be more inclusive, more creative, which will require some discomfort and some ambivalence.⁵⁵⁰ These are the growing pains of a social space that actually offer hope. My goal is that through this project, interfaith has been seen as a space that has real affect on society, that as a thirdspace it is generative. While

⁵⁴⁸ Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.

⁵⁴⁹ Hirschfield, *You Don’t Have to be Wrong for me to be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism*. 229.

⁵⁵⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 123.

acknowledging the challenges that different types of interfaith spaces bring, my hope is that an interfaith ethic will be cultivated in those that enter these spaces.

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