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FAITH AT THE INTERSECTIONS

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Chaplains often encounter diversity refracted through the intersections with religious identity, beliefs, usages of space, and concrete spiritual practices. All of this is further complicated for students by the need to find ways to process their own encounters with divergent opinions, practices, and indeed those things within their own faith community. It is important for us as chaplains to listen to the actual lived experience of students of all kinds so that the truths of their experience can be honored and not dismissed. Our role is often understood to be to interpret traditions to members of the university community. What is less understood is our role in interpreting sometimes uncomfortable experiences to our faith communities and advocating for humble hearing of them. These reflections enable us to begin to do that. In combination with our experiences, they challenge us to struggle and to wrestle with our received traditions as we seek to do well by the values of truth, compassion, humility, and justice. The reflections seek to hold together this wrestling with the challenges of university experience and the intersection of religious identities and perspectives.

A couple of disclaimers are probably needed to start this response. Although I and my colleague chaplains tend to be lumped together as people of faith—‘religious’—it is actually quite hard for any of us to speak for others of us. Our faiths are different, and they are each lived, experiential gestalts, which means that while we can sometimes note some fellow feeling across different traditions, we can’t interpret someone else’s tradition reliably for a third party. All of which is to say that I can only speak for myself in my own braided cord of traditions, but I do think that there are resemblances which, handled cautiously, can be recognized across a number of our traditions.

Another disclaimer would be to note that a religious identity is very much compatible with concern for equality and diversity, even if some prominent and noisy political co-options of various faiths have made it seem otherwise. There are many Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, etc. whose faith inspires and resources them to engage in practices of compassionate service to people with protected characteristics.

As chaplains, we do not only relate with those of our own belief communities. One of our roles is to interpret our faiths, beliefs, and practices into the university community to help the university to collectively become more religiously literate. In doing so, we help to include more fully those with religious faith or who hold other belief systems. It is less generally appreciated that many chaplains offer support and encouragement to those outside our own faiths and beliefs—including to those who might describe themselves as atheist or ‘not religious.’

However, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that faith communities can, for a variety of reasons, be a part of the problem for people who have other protected characteristics—

intersecting or otherwise. In many cases this is because our various faith communities are not monolithic or uniform in belief or practice. Rather, it might be better to think of world religions as centuries-old and millennia-long conversations. In these very extended conversations, you would find people and parties wrestling with how to hold together the data of the human condition with spiritual experience, veneration for significant and founding figures, and received understandings. These big ongoing conversations are simultaneously attempting to assimilate new knowledge and new conditions of life whilst maintaining dialogue with older wisdoms and trying to reframe or compost older mistaken understandings. Indeed, discerning what is wisdom and what is mistaken is a big part of the conversation.

So it is that an important role of chaplains—along with others—can also be to help bring into those big, long, faith conversations the voices of those who are marginalized, misunderstood, reviled, and even persecuted. Chaplains have an important responsibility, because our work pulls us out of the comfort and parochialism of our faith communities into a context where voices we may not otherwise hear are present. These voices come from people deserving of our care and respect. In my faith tradition, this is founded in ideas of equality before God who loves all and in whose image all humans are made and dignified: who calls us to join with Godself in loving and practically caring for others. I could go on (but won't)!

Sometimes the marginalized are within the faith community. Sometimes, perhaps, they fear to be known, or experience varying degrees of unwitting, tacit, or explicit exclusion. Sometimes the marginalized are outside the faith community but find no support—or even experience hostility—from it. Our task, as chaplains within the university, is to encourage and enable our faith communities to live up to the good behaviors that they valorize, behaviors such as: including, listening, doing justly, respecting humanity, giving dignity, offering care, and working for the benefit of those who suffer prejudice, ignorance, and collusion in ill treatment. These desired behaviors encourage us to work with others of good will towards such ends: towards the common good.

It is stories and perspectives like those shared in this volume that can help 'religious people' to remember the lived human realities that can be obscured behind the social and political posturing that busy lives and shallow thinking can leave unchallenged—including (shamefully) in our communities of faith.

Often this will mean working with people whose motivations for action and reform differ in various respects from our own. I think of concerns about 'lad culture,' for example. This is an area where a common ground of agreement may be about human dignity, consent, objectification, and the repudiation of violence, denigration, or coercion. There are other areas, no doubt, where there are differences of viewpoint, but around the concern for the effects of lad culture there can be common cause made.

Sometimes this may mean challenging ways of talking about ourselves or others. A phrase like 'man up' can be used without thought about how it may reinforce a gendered stereotype which could contribute negatively to someone's mental health struggles or could further alienate them. Part of our role can be to connect these concerns with narratives and perspectival resources in our own faith traditions. These can then authentically enable people of faith to work with others

to bring about changes in the public sphere that enable more people to participate and contribute to our common life.

One of the things I think that faith communities can learn from these stories and reflections is practical strategies and tactics for—not to put too fine a point on it—loving our neighbors as ourselves. Such loving has to be more than well-wishing; it has to be embodied in concrete attitudes, actions, and procedures. Members of our communities of faith can often unreflectingly share the cultural tropes of disdain for ‘political correctness’ or ‘health and safety.’ However, these can be reframed as a careful consideration of how in practical terms we can love our neighbors by caring about their struggles and taking practical steps to ensure their safety. Most faith communities have stories and commands to do the work of caring, even when it is inconvenient to us or even when it troubles us. This kind of perspective is what is mobilized in response to the situations shared and reflected in this book.

Speaking from my own faith tradition (though noting that we’re not alone in this), I am aware that we had, historically, some success in accommodating how we understand our faith to the liberal individualism of the West. This has had positive effects in enabling us to affirm human rights and at the beginning of the modern period to work for the abolition of slavery and the recognition of human dignities in workplaces and voting systems. However, that has come at the cost of the effective elision of systemic oppressions. The focus on individuals has got in the way of us seeing how we can all collude relatively unwittingly and in small, often outsourced, ways to the detriment of people characterized by social constructions of race, gender, disability, etc. The voices in this book enable us to begin to see the systemic issues through the lens of individuals who suffer them, and challenge us to recover the more solidary perspectives in our scriptures and historical backgrounds.

I thank the writers for sharing their perspectives, and hope—indeed pray—that we readers can respond well to them.