The “Faith” in Interfaith

When Wilfred Cantwell Smith accepted an appointment by the Canadian Overseas Missions Council to serve as a faculty member at Forman Christian College in Lahore in the early 1940s (then part of an undivided India under British rule, now a major city in Pakistan), he had little idea that the experience would change his understanding of Christian mission, Christian faith, and, as he titled one of his most widely read books, “patterns of faith around the world.” These larger insights stemmed from a simple realization: most of the teachers and students at Forman were not Christian; they were Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus. “The Christians among us,” Smith observed, “were attempting to illustrate and live out our faith; our colleagues, participants in other traditions, often reverent individuals, were doing the same with theirs. They were happy to work with us, as we with them, towards constructing and maintaining a community—a friendly and cooperative community, religiously diverse.”[1]

Had Smith been asked before he arrived what a Christian ought to do when put in the same room as someone of a different religion, he might well have answered, “Try to convert them.” But when he found himself in a situation where he grew to respect people of other faiths as colleagues and, especially living in an unfamiliar country, rely on them as friends, he found other thoughts arising as well. How were they, together, to most effectively teach their students? What could they do, together, about the increasing religious violence in the subcontinent? What might he as a Christian learn from the faiths of the people around him?

In short, Wilfred Cantwell Smith was asking the types of questions that literally define the term “interfaith”: What do my interactions with Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus mean for my relationship with Christianity? And,

how does my Christian faith influence the manner in which I interact with people who are Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus?

Smith quickly realized that the diversity that characterized 1940s Lahore would not stay trapped there long. Modernity meant that the type of interfaith interaction he was experiencing at Forman Christian College would soon be the norm for cities worldwide. (Note the resonances with Peter Berger.) Smith viewed the growth of interaction between people who orient around religion differently as one of the great challenges of modern times: "The problem posed in this area is at least as important for humanity as that of nuclear physics; as intellectually challenging, as intricate, as exciting, as consequential."[2] And he realized that the field of religious studies was, at least in its mid-twentieth-century form, inadequate to the challenge.

The previous chapter took a deep dive into the "inter" half of interfaith. In this chapter, we look at the "faith" side. Smith's experience in Lahore is an ideal starting point because it highlights a situation in which the interaction between people of different identities clearly implicated their faith lives. It is important to emphasize that interfaith work is not simply about people with different religious identities in close quarters; that would characterize every grocery store, restaurant, and train station within five square miles of where I currently sit. Interfaith refers to situations where people with diverse faiths interact, *and their faith identities are somehow involved*.

Just as an exploration of interracial interaction requires a theory of the concept of "race," so a deep understanding of interfaith engagement requires a layered understanding of what "faith" means. Much of this chapter focuses on how Smith's definition of faith helps interfaith leaders do their work.

Before jumping in, I want to address the question: What is it about faith or religious identity that matters so much? The theologian Paul Tillich famously said that religion is about "ultimate concerns."[3] I understand ultimate concerns in two ways: the content of religious traditions, and the emotional force those traditions inspire in people. In other words, religious traditions contain elements that are ultimate in nature—stories of creation, views on human purpose, questions about salvation and the afterlife. And religious traditions energize people to invest a range of concerns that might normally be viewed as pedestrian with a sense of ultimacy. That is not just a

group of people; that is the *ummah*, or the church, or the people of Israel. That is not just a piece of real estate; that is the place where Muhammad lifted off on his Night Journey, where the Second Temple once stood, where Jesus walked.

Different people are motivated in ultimate ways about different dimensions of religious traditions. Scripture motivates some in ultimate ways; for others, it is sacred place and peoplehood; and for others, it is rituals and ceremonies. Moreover, not only do people emphasize different dimensions of traditions, but they interpret and relate to those dimensions in very different ways. People in the Catholic Worker movement risk jail time to lead peace demonstrations with the hope of ending all wars. IRA militia members risk jail time to plant bombs for sectarian purposes. Though both claim to be Catholic, and both are motivated by elements of the tradition in ultimate ways, they emphasize different parts and interpret those parts in divergent ways.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith earned degrees from the University of Toronto, Cambridge, and Princeton. He found it frustrating that his studies in religion at all three universities cast little light on what he considered the most important issues raised by the religiously diverse environment of Forman Christian College. These included, in his own words, "learn[ing] to live together with our seriously different traditions, not only in peace but in some sort of mutual trust and mutual loyalty" and "arriving at a point . . . where we can appreciate others' values without losing allegiance to our own."[4]

The trouble with the academic study of religion, according to Smith, was that it focused too much on gathering data about the outward aspects of religions, under the assumption that this information would somehow automatically provide insight into the lives of that religion's followers. Smith finds this logic faulty, writing, "It is possible to know a great deal about what are called the various religious systems, and still not understand the people whose lives they help to form . . . It is one thing to know, for instance, that in Christian worship there is a cross; it is another to know what the cross means to the Christian who is worshipping."[5]

Smith's own primary concern was not with religious systems but with religious persons. After all, it wasn't Islam and Hinduism that had to get along at Forman; it was Muslims and Hindus. What type of inquiry might a

religious studies scholar undertake to gain a deeper understanding of Muslims and Hindus? How might that inquiry be conducted to yield insights that would help them get along better?

To accomplish this, Smith makes four crucial moves. First, he separates what he calls the outward system of a religious tradition from the inner qualities that characterize individual adherents. The hajj is part of the outward system of Islam; one can show you the city of Mecca on a map and a picture of the Kaaba. But this approach does not give us much insight into the heart of any particular Muslim who is going through that experience.

This example sets up Smith's second move: addressing how to gain insight into the inner quality of an individual believer. Such a quality neither emerges entirely out of the individual's being nor magically drops from the doctrine or rituals of a religious system. Rather, the key is the relationship between the two, the manner in which the individual emphasizes and interacts with the various parts of the religious system—the Christian and the cross, the Muslim and the Kaaba, the Sikh and the Guru Granth Sahib. Smith sees this relationship between the adherent and the tradition as the central focus of his scholarly inquiry. He calls this relationship "faith."

The third move Smith makes is to suggest that one way to get a sense of the faith of a person is to observe how she expresses her relationship with her tradition in various daily contexts. To illustrate, Smith tells the story of a Muslim fruit seller he comes across while trekking in a remote area of the Himalayas. The man is using a handmade scale and some rocks to weigh the oranges he sells. Customers come by and order a pound or two of oranges; the fruit seller puts a certain number of rocks on his homemade scale, weighs them against the oranges, and states the price. None of his customers seem to have any problem with this. They watch the man put the oranges and the rocks on the scale, pay the stated price, and walk away with their fruit. Smith falls into conversation with the man and inquires about how this system is verified. The rocks have no markings that indicate their weight, and the scale is clearly not standardized. What prevents the man from overcharging his customers, Smith wonders. The fruit seller responds to Smith's question by quoting a verse from the Qur'an, "Lo, He over all things is watching." The implication is that this phrase requires of the fruit seller that he deal with his customers honestly. Moreover, his customers

seem to know this about the fruit seller and, in the context of that small village, are willing to accept it as his bond.[6]

For Smith, the relationship between this man, the line in the Qur'an, and the manner in which he sold fruit is a perfect illustration of the concept of faith. The verse is part of the religious system called Islam, the man had a profound relationship with that particular verse, and the relationship expressed itself in the way he sold fruit. It is easy to imagine Muslims who cannot quote that particular verse from memory or might do so in a rote manner. They do not, for whatever reason, have a deep relationship with that particular line. Some might not quote the Qur'an at all but instead call attention to a particular Muslim saint and claim that the saint's example compels honesty. That Muslim is emphasizing a different dimension of the tradition of Islam. Some Muslims might intentionally overcharge their customers, thereby demonstrating a weak relationship with the parts of Islam that command honesty. This same person might punctiliously perform his five daily prayers. Some people who call themselves Muslims will emphasize some dimensions of the religious system called Islam, and other Muslims will emphasize other dimensions of the tradition.

This example also highlights Smith's fourth move—emphasizing social context. The fruit seller needed customers who were willing to accept that his honesty was guaranteed by a Qur'anic line. If the fruit seller was in a busy train station in the city of Bombay, rather than a small village in the Himalayas, his quoting of the sacred verse might not have been good enough for his customers. They might have demanded a standardized scale and proper weights rather than Qur'anic recitation. The social context of that Himalayan village allowed the Muslim fruit seller to express his faith in a particular manner.

There are, of course, myriad questions and critiques of Smith by his fellow comparative religions scholars. My purpose in presenting his understanding of faith is not to take sides in internal battles within a scholarly field. It is, instead, to underscore the key dimensions of an influential intellectual framework that is highly relevant for interfaith leaders. A friend of mine from grad school once told me: All models are wrong; some models are useful. For interfaith leaders, Smith's theory of comparative religions is extremely useful, especially in how it charts a middle course between two perennial arguments with regard to religious diversity.

ARE RELIGIONS MORE ALIKE OR MORE DIFFERENT?

The first argument can be summed up quite simply: are religions very different, or are they basically the same? Stephen Prothero is a key proponent of the "religions are very different" school of thought, and Karen Armstrong is an ardent defender of the "religions are essentially the same" view.

In the opening of his book *God Is Not One*, Prothero observes, "At least since the first petals of the counterculture bloomed across Europe and the United States in the 1960s, it has been fashionable to affirm that all religions are beautiful and true."[7] The most common metaphor for illustrating this view is the idea of Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Judaism, and so on being different paths up the same mountain, all leading to the same place. Prothero has little patience for this point of view, writing, "This is a lovely sentiment, but it is dangerous, disrespectful and untrue."[8] Religions diverge in many areas, including doctrine, ritual, and law. Christians don't go on pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims do not find holiness in the cross, and Jewish law does not forbid alcohol, as Muslim law does. To dismiss these differences as the unimportant "foothills" in favor of the more magnificent summit is, for Prothero, "pretend pluralism."[9]

Perhaps the best known contemporary advocate for the view that religions are basically the same is the prolific author Karen Armstrong. Armstrong has sought to advance her view of religions being in essence the same through the Charter for Compassion project, which has captured the imagination of many people around the world. She says in her TED Prize talk that launched the Charter for Compassion, "It is an arresting fact that right across the board, in every single one of the major world faiths, the ability to feel with the other . . . is not only the test of any true religiosity, it is also what will bring us into the presence of what Jews, Christians and Muslims call 'God' or the 'Divine.' It is compassion, says the Buddha, which brings you to Nirvana."[10]

For Armstrong, this is most clearly illustrated in the fact that all the major religious systems have some version of what is generally known as the Golden Rule. The most commonly expressed version of this in the West is the Christian version: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In that same speech, Armstrong highlights that Confucius articulated a version of the Golden Rule five centuries before Christ, telling his

followers that the practice of "human-heartedness" would bring them to the transcendent experience of *ren*. Other articulations of the Golden Rule include: "None of you truly believes until he wants for his brother what he wants for himself," a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, and "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor," a teaching of Rabbi Hillel.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's approach to the question of whether religions are very different or essentially alike is to highlight that all religions are made up of a myriad of dimensions, including doctrine, texts, rituals, ethics, community, art, and archetypal heroes. Different religious systems like Islam and Judaism are likely to be alike in some dimensions (the doctrine of monotheism and the primacy of sacred law) and different in other areas (whether God gave Jerusalem to Muslims or Jews). But, as it is people who relate, interpret, and give expression to various dimensions of religious systems, the real question is, "Are Muslims and Jews forming relationships with the dimensions of their traditions that are more alike, or the dimensions that are more different?" And as context matters greatly, the question for interfaith leaders is: "Given that there are dimensions of Islam and Judaism that are similar and those that are different, what can I do to encourage Muslims and Jews to highlight the dimensions that are similar? What stories might I emphasize? What spaces might I create? What activities might I organize?"

Let me illustrate with a personal story. When I was eight or nine years old, I received an invitation to the birthday party of one of the more popular boys in class. I was over the moon. On the morning of the party, my mother noticed that the invitation said that Danny's parents would be making hot dogs for lunch. As my mother was not sure whether the hot dogs were beef or pork, and as not eating pork was an important part of our Muslim identity, my mother sent me to Danny's party with two beef hot dogs in a plastic bag and instructions to politely ask his parents to heat them up in a separate (unporked) pan. I was nonplussed. I did not relish being the brown boy with the beef hot dogs at the popular kid's birthday party. But obeying my parents was also a part of my being Muslim (and being eight), so I looked for ways to hide the hot dogs on my body (an inelegant and nearly impossible task) and went off to the party.

When lunchtime came, I found a way to sneak away from the crowd and into the kitchen, where I slunk into a corner with my little plastic baggie. I discovered, to my surprise, that somebody had beat me to the spot. In that

corner stood another little boy doing his best to hide a plastic bag that carried two hot dogs.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"My name is Chaim," he replied. "My mom made me bring beef hot dogs," he said, reluctantly holding up the plastic bag.

"Are you Muslim?" I asked, somewhat incredulous.

"No," he said. "I'm Jewish."

I remember having two dominant thoughts at that time: This kid and me, we were going to be friends. And whatever "Jewish" was, I liked it.

It is interesting to note that many of my closest friends have been Jewish. Of course, that single incident didn't cement those friendships, but it did positively incline me from an early age. From that point on, when I met a Jew, I assumed we had similarities, and I assumed those similarities had something to do with how we related to our respective religions.

For me, the lesson of this story is simple: a particular environment made salient a commonality in faith between Chaim and me. A different environment may have elicited different expressions of our faith, expressions that could have highlighted divisions rather than resonances. What if, for example, our parents had taken us to dueling demonstrations on the Middle East, me joining most other Muslims on the pro-Palestinian side and Chaim joining most other Jews on the pro-Israeli side? That environment would have made other dimensions of our traditions salient, and that first meeting could very well have been marked by bitter antagonism rather than friendship.

An important part of what interfaith leaders do is construct environments that highlight similarities in faiths across diverse people and groups, therefore making cooperation more likely.

RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL?

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's theories also help us chart a middle path between two poles on the question of what kind of participants interfaith leaders should recruit, those who represent religious traditions or those who define themselves as individualistically spiritual?

People at the first pole are exponents of a framework that, for my purposes here, I will associate with Will Herberg's famous 1955 book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*.[11] Herberg called mid-twentieth-century America a

"triple melting pot" with religious identity as the primary social marker. Herberg regarded the three communities he writes about as equally American (a significant social improvement from the Protestant domination of previous eras), and viewed them as enclosed and monolithic. He was generally blind to differences within traditions, making little mention of ethnic diversity in the Catholic Church, racial differences among Protestants, or the various theological movements in Judaism. And he portrayed an America where the three communities essentially lived parallel lives in their separate religious circles, meeting one another only by intentional effort.

Herbergians recognize that many more religions are now represented in the United States, but effectively take religious diversity to mean "Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and the like." They tend to project Herberg's mid-twentieth-century model of communities as enclosed and monolithic onto the early-twenty-first-century American landscape.

The spiritual perspective is perhaps best embodied by the famous example of Sheilaism from the classic book coauthored by Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*. In describing her understanding of cosmic matters, Sheila tells the research team, "I believe in God . . . I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice . . . It's just love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other."[12]

Bellah and his coauthors note that Sheila likely once belonged to a community or tradition, or at least is familiar with one, but does not engage with it now. She is unwilling to state anything more specific about her faith or spiritual worldview than what I've quoted.

The religious/Herbergian approach to interfaith cooperation pictures a person from the Protestant house visiting a person in the Jewish house for tea. This is not really how we live today. There are many stripes of Protestants and Jews (and Mormons and atheists and Daoists), and rarely do they live in highly separate enclaves. As I wrote in chapter 2, we interact with much more frequency than Herberg's model suggests, which means the model of leaving one religious enclave to visit another is not an accurate image of interfaith cooperation.

The Herbergian approach privileges people in the formal hierarchy of religious systems, typically scholars or clergy, viewing them as more authentic and powerful representatives of communities and traditions. This discriminates against the vast majority of people who are not part of a formal religious hierarchy, and it discourages those who do not (for very good reasons) desire to represent entire systems. Furthermore, it demands of traditions that do not have formal religious hierarchies in the manner of, say, the Catholic Church that they pretend to.

The language used by this interfaith approach betrays its biases. Take the oft-quoted statement by the renowned Catholic theologian Hans Küng, which has become a kind of Lord's Prayer of a certain kind of interfaith cooperation: "No peace between the nations without peace between the religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions."[13] As "religions" don't do things, they must be represented by creatures who do, namely, people. And the kind of people that Küng undoubtedly has in mind are people quite like him, with titles before their names (Rabbi, Reverend, Father) and plenty of letters after (SJ, PhD, JD).

The spiritual/Sheila approach is more common among younger people and at the grassroots level, in the form of book groups and college campus "meaning making" conversations. This approach often takes pride in involving people at some distance from "world religion" systems, including those who have an oppositional attitude toward religious tradition. While more open to a range of people and diverse spiritual expressions than the more formal approach I've described, it can turn off people who are a part of such traditions or have respect for the hierarchies within them.

Smith's middle path emphasizes, with Herberg, that religious traditions and their corresponding communities do in fact exist and matter a great deal. It parts ways with Herberg by emphasizing the internal diversity of these traditions, rather than viewing them as monoliths. Moreover, Smith would vehemently disagree with the Herbergian understanding of individuals as formal ambassadors of religious systems. In this sense, Smith would likely agree with Sheila's insistence that she herself is the agent of meaning making, but he would disagree with her notion that she generates this meaning out of thin air. Instead, he would encourage Sheila to see the symbols and forms that she makes meaning with—a favorite hymn, perhaps, or a cherished object like prayer beads—as dimensions of a larger tradition.

Part of the reason that these two approaches continue to organize interfaith work is that there is some coherence to each. In the religious/Herbergian approach, your ticket in is a recognizable religious label. There are some benefits to this. The various labels—Muslim, Hindu, Mormon, Jain—can all be organized under the familiar category "religion," and programs can be structured from this straightforward organizing category. The drawback is that it pretends that the only patterns of difference that matter are the "world religion" categories.

The spiritual/Sheila approach has the advantage of being, on the surface, open to a wider range of people. In reality, however, it tends to discourage people who do claim clear labels and strong religious commitments. Furthermore, unlike the religious/Herbergian approach, it is hard to think of a good way to organize an interfaith program in the spiritual/Sheila approach. My experience of such gatherings involved plenty of unsatisfying and meandering discussions and, I kid you not, quite a bit of interpretive dance. Without organizing categories like "religion," the facilitators couldn't think of much else for the group to do together. In my mind, the biggest problem with the spiritual/Sheila approach is that it pretends that there are no religious or spiritual patterns at all.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Herberg was undoubtedly onto something when he broke apart the myth of a Protestant America and spoke of the multiple world religion communities that had social significance within the country. But to pretend that world religion is the only pattern of identity and interaction that matters is to live in a time warp, and a two-dimensional one at that. Yet to fully embrace the Sheila paradigm and chase around hundreds of millions of patterns won't work either.

The question boils down to this: when it comes to religious diversity, what patterns of identity and interaction should interfaith leaders pay attention to? I want to suggest four:

1. The first pattern to pay attention to is the *world religions category*. I've written much about this already, so I won't elaborate more here.

Suffice it to say that the labels Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, and so on matter a great deal to a great many people.

2. The second pattern is *intrafaith diversity*, the doctrinal variety within every tradition and community. Within Christianity, there are Catholics and Protestants. Within Protestants, there are "mainline" and "evangelical." Within "mainline," there are Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, ELCA Lutherans, and members of the United Church of Christ. These various distinctions emerged because enough people emphasized different elements of doctrine within the broader tradition and generated the energy to build communities around those distinctive elements. Shia Muslims emphasize the Prophet Muhammad's appointment of Ali as the first imam and next leader of the Muslim community. Sunni Muslims do not. This doctrinal difference resulted in the emergence of different communities within the tradition of Islam. There is a similar story in just about every religion. Because these doctrinal communities constitute a major pattern of identity, interfaith leaders have to pay attention to them, and not just the broader world religion system from which they emerge.
3. The third pattern is *intersectional identities*. Nobody is defined entirely by his or her religious identity. Even if religion may be highly salient, it is always intersecting with other identities like race, class, gender, geography, politics, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality. Interfaith leaders have to recognize how intersecting identities influence patterns of being, believing, and belonging. Consider all the various identities that made up Ruth Messinger in 1964—white, female, Jewish, graduate school educated, social worker, politically liberal, and raised in a financially comfortable environment in New York City. Think also of the various identities of Ruth's partners. Certainly their evangelical Christian faith was a primary identity, but their location in western Oklahoma no doubt had something to do with their response to Ruth's overtures, and the fact that they lived in houses gave them the class privilege to offer up those houses as foster homes. Not all identities matter equally for the purpose of interfaith intersectionality. Being a middle child might be an important identity for many, and there is certainly a rich psychological literature on it, but there is no "middle child church" or "middle child theology" the

way there is a "black church" and "feminist theology." Two vectors of intersectionality seem especially important to highlight.

- The first is political. Robert Putnam and David Campbell write in *American Grace* about how meaningful religious divisions in the United States are not so much between Christians and Jews but between people who, at one pole, are politically conservative and highly devout across religions and those, at the other pole, who are politically liberal and lightly devout or secular. Putnam and Campbell even find evidence that political ideology drives religious choice, meaning that someone who is politically conservative is more likely to leave a liberal church for a conservative one rather than change her politics.[14] This matters for interfaith leaders because it means that the most significant fault line to emerge in an interfaith discussion group may be between a Protestant who goes to church three times a week and is pro-life, and a Protestant who goes to church three times a year and is pro-choice.
- The second type of intersectional diversity I want to underscore is embracing multiple religious traditions, or *Being Both*, as Susan Katz Miller calls it in her recent book. Miller points out the significant swath of Americans who are in interfaith marriages or live-in relationships, 37 percent according to a 2008 Pew survey, a number that has surely risen since then. Many members of this group are part of what Miller calls "a grassroots movement of interfaith families claiming the right to create their own communities beyond a single creed or dogma, bound instead by respect for both Judaism and Christianity and a desire to explore the theological similarities, differences and points of historical and theological connection."[15] This is a growing category that interfaith leaders need to recognize and pay attention to.

4. The fourth distinct pattern I want to highlight are the *religious nones*. Twenty percent of Americans check "none" on religious identity surveys, and among millennials, the number is 33 percent and seems to be rising. There are three groups within this category that I want to highlight. The first and most obvious are the ardent atheists, largely because of the best-selling books and loud voices associated with this

identity published over the past several years. But numerically atheists are relatively small. A larger group within the nones comprises people who might be called seekers or spiritual but not religious, people who resemble Bellah's Sheila. The nones also contain the growing number of people who proactively seek community with others who share their secular values. These communities often mirror many important dimensions of religious traditions, while maintaining intentionally nonreligious ethics. Secular humanism has central texts and prominent heroes and is increasingly creating formal communities and rituals for important life events like birth, marriage, and death.[16] Language is a challenge when it comes to this category, in part because it contains a wide diversity of people and in part because sociologists have only recently paid attention to those who were unwilling to place themselves into world religion categories in surveys. It seems pretty straightforward that few people wish to be known as a none. But beyond that agreement, there are only arguments. Ronald Dworkin, in *Religion Without God*, maintains that employing the word "religious" for those who marvel at the mystery of the universe but do not believe in God is useful; "expanding the territory of religion improves clarity by making plain the importance of what is shared across that territory."[17] For myself, for now, I will stick with Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the guiding light of this chapter, who addresses nontheistic worldviews and maintains that the word "faith" is still relevant: "Simply to be a theist is by no means to be a person of faith. To be a non-theist is by no means not to have faith . . . faith is sensitivity and response, to the intangibles of ultimate worth."[18] We approach such intangibles through the tangible dimensions of traditions, whether the birth rituals of Judaism or the communal picnic of a secular humanist society.

THE VALUE OF TRADITIONS

To conclude, I want to address the question Why should interfaith leaders emphasize tradition at all, religious or otherwise? Given that interfaith leadership is about the people not the systems, why not treat all comers as

individuals, as Sheilas? If they want to connect themselves to a tradition, fine. If not, that's fine, too. Why be forward about the system?

This is a complicated question. Part of the answer is that many, many people do in fact locate their identity and energy in connection to a system or tradition. Being forward about the question is simply giving them permission to talk openly about something that matters greatly to them. A second reason is that many of the things through which spirituals/Sheilas make meaning are, in fact, part of traditions, but are not recognized as such. For example, I've met many people who tell me that although they were raised Catholic, they have no connection to the tradition whatsoever. And then they say that they find themselves enormously inspired by Pope Francis. It seems to me that there is value in gently suggesting that Pope Francis is actually very much a part of the Catholic tradition. The office he holds, the name he chose, the manner in which he speaks, the reasons underlying his views—all these things are actually quite Catholic. If you find Pope Francis life giving, perhaps you will find some other dimensions of the Catholic tradition life giving as well. It doesn't hurt to issue the invitation.

The reason for this is because religious traditions generate significant social value. Mary Jo Bane, Brent Coffin, and Richard Higgins offer six ways in the introduction to their book, *Taking Faith Seriously* (they use the terms "faith" and "religion" interchangeably, which would have given Wilfred Cantwell Smith heartburn):[19]

- Fostering expression
- Forming identities
- Creating social bonds
- Shaping moral discourse
- Enabling participation
- Providing social services

I happen to be writing in the wake of a national tragedy, leavened by stunning acts of faith-inspired goodness, goodness that illustrates in perfect poetry the somewhat stiff typology of the six ways listed.

On June 17, 2015, a small group of parishioners at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, gathered for the regular Wednesday

night Bible study.[20] About a dozen of them sat around a green table, sang hymns, offered prayers, and reflected upon verses 4:16–20 from the Gospel of Mark.

The regulars at Mother Emanuel Church were joined that night by a visitor, a twenty-one-year-old white man with a mop of stringy hair. Dylann Roof had knocked on the door of the church, asked for the pastor, and been welcomed to the Bible study. It was somewhat unusual to have a young white man drop in for a Wednesday night Bible study at a black church, but the congregants believed that God's grace is open to everyone all the time. The senior pastor, the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, sat the young man in an honored place, right next to him.

It was not until the end of the Bible study, when Dylann Roof took out his .45-caliber Glock semiautomatic pistol and started shooting that his intentions were made plain. "You don't have to do this," Tywanza Sanders, a twenty-six-year-old barber, pleaded with the gunman.[21]

"You rape our women. And you're taking over our country," Dylann Roof responded. "I have to do this."[22] At the end of the terror, nine people were dead, including Mr. Sanders and the Reverend Pinckney.

In the hours after, America seemed to sway between barely contained anger and shocked silence. It was the community that had been most affected who somehow managed grace.

Thirty-six hours after the shooting, at a bond hearing that took place over closed-circuit television, family members of the dead confronted the murderer of their loved ones. "I forgive you," Nadine Collier said to her mother's killer, who wore striped prison garb and a blank expression. "I will never talk to her ever again, never be able to hold her again. I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me, you hurt a lot of people, but I forgive you."[23]

Alana Simmons, whose grandfather Daniel Simmons was killed by Dylann Roof, said, "Everyone's plea for your soul is proof that they lived in love and their legacies live in love."[24]

The Sunday after the shooting, Mother Emanuel Church held services without its senior pastor. Those who knew him, like the Reverend Jermaine Watkins of Journey Church, climbed into the pulpit and spoke words like this:

> To hatred, we say no way, not today. To racism, we say no way, not today. To reconciliation, we say yes. To a racial war, we say no way, not today. To racial fear, we say no way, not

today.[25]

How is it that family and community members could, so soon after the most heinous attack imaginable, forgive the perpetrator and focus on reconciliation? The answer, according to the Aspen Institute's Eric Motley, is obvious: religious tradition. In a beautiful piece for the Aspen Institute's website, Motley explains how the relationship of the congregants of Mother Emanuel to the various dimensions of the Christian tradition gave them equanimity in the wake of their unspeakable tragedy.[26] His essay illustrates every one of the six points in Bane, Coffin, and Higgins's list.

Motley writes of the "timeless values" instilled by Wednesday night Bible study, sessions that he attended regularly growing up. He credits those Bible sessions with giving him his identity. "We discussed what was happening around us and in our lives," he recalls, "and we looked at those events with a collective wisdom shaped by our biblical understanding of history and human nature . . . The themes of love, faith, hope, and forgiveness were the biblical cornerstones of our collective journey, reminding us that love is the law of life."

Note the emphasis on the word "collective," and the highlighting of Christian moral discourse. For Motley, this foundation of strong community combined with cosmic narrative in the tradition of Christianity inspired family members of the Charleston nine with the strength to show up—to participate—and provided them a moral lexicon from which to choose their words.

Motley quotes from the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "We must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness." He interprets this to mean that "our forgiveness of others is supposed to be an expression of God's divine forgiveness to us." It was this standard that the congregants of Mother Emanuel were living out.

It does not escape Motley that "secular culture," in the wake of the tragedy-forgiveness epic in Charleston, had lauded Mother Emanuel's long history of social action: serving as a stop on the Underground Railroad, nurturing a slave revolt, hosting Martin Luther King Jr., giving out food baskets to poor people in the community. This same secular culture, Motley notes, often looked at the regularity of Sunday morning church services and Wednesday night Bible study "sneeringly and dismissively." But it is precisely these rituals that undergirded the more above-the-surface, celebrated, and quantifiable social contributions of religious communities.

The power of a religious tradition, Motley points out, is the connections it cultivates between things like identity formation, the building of social bonds, and the nurturing of moral discourse. Engaging in the tradition trains the ethic of grace into your spiritual muscle memory, giving you strength to participate when you'd rather stay home, the words to say when you are speechless. "In this moment of grief, and in the rest of our trouble-filled lives, it is our faith that sustains us, with the hope of transcendence," Motley writes.

That is why attention to traditions, in relationship to the people that they sustain, matters.