

The “Inter” in Interfaith

“Modernity pluralizes,” writes the renowned social theorist Peter Berger.¹ For the vast majority of human history, the vast majority of humankind lived the vast majority of their lives in a world of people who were largely similar to them. The distinguishing feature of our age (dating from the middle of the twentieth century) is pluralization, meaning the frequent and intense interaction between people with different identities. Technological advances in air travel and communications, increased migration coupled with the growth of global cities, and the end of colonialism and the decline of both legal and social barriers between different groups have all led to a world where contact between diverse people and ideas is simply standard operating procedure. As Robert Putnam puts it in his paper “*E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st Century*”: “The most certain prediction that we can make about almost any modern society is that it will be more diverse a generation from now than it is today.”²

I look will at the impact of pluralization at four levels:

- Individual identity
- Continuity of religious communities
- Microenvironments
- Macroenvironments

To bring social theory to life, I will provide a sketch of an American town with a predominantly Methodist population that starts to experience diversity when a Muslim family moves in. I will ask you to put yourself in the position of various characters at the four levels I’ve mentioned, and see the world from their perspective. All of the characters are composites of

people that I know. They are meant to provide insights into how people in their various complexities respond to diversity, rather than serve as stereotypes. Of course, for everyone I know who acts like one of the characters I've sketched below, I know ten others with the same identity characteristics (Methodist teenager, Pakistani imam) who act differently.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

The first character I'd like you to take the perspective of is a white, male Methodist teenager in a largely homogenous town. Your family has been Methodist for generations and you live in a neighborhood where seemingly everybody goes to a Methodist church on Sunday. You've never really wondered too much about being Methodist. It's simply the water you swim in, the way of the world.

One fine day, a Muslim family moves in down the street. You notice that they don't show up to church on Sundays. Someone mentions to you that the Muslim family takes Friday afternoons off for something called *jumma*. As you get ready for church one Sunday morning, you wonder what the teenagers in the Muslim family are doing at that time. As you imagine them sleeping in, you think to yourself, "If they aren't going to church, why am I going?" This is a question that literally never occurred to you before. Going to church on Sundays was simply automatic, like the sun rising. Sunday mornings existed for going to church. It is only the presence of people who do things differently that makes you reflect on your own patterns.

One of the teenagers from the Muslim family goes to your school. You've played pickup basketball games with him, and he sits at a nearby table for lunch. For a week now, he hasn't been at the basketball courts after school, and you haven't seen him in the cafeteria. As you come out of the lunchroom one day, you bump into him leaving the library. "How come you haven't been playing ball lately?" you ask. "It's Ramadan," he says. "I'm fasting all day. No food, no water." That explains why he hasn't been in the cafeteria either.

You Google "Ramadan" on your iPhone and read that it's one of the five pillars of Islam and lasts a month. No eating or drinking all day for a full month! Does that include weekends? Are you allowed to take a day off if you get sick?

You mention to your mother that a kid you play basketball with is Muslim and is fasting for Ramadan. He spends lunchtime in the library. She says, “You ought to eat your lunch quickly and go keep him company.”

Your older brother walks down the stairs. He’s overheard the conversation and adds his two cents: “Why would you do anything to help a Muslim? I say stay as far away from those people as you can.”

So, what should you do? Keep the Muslim kid company or stay away?

As you are thinking this over, you overhear your mother arguing with your brother. “That’s not a very Christian thing to say,” your mother scolds. “We Christians are meant to be good neighbors. Jesus reached out to everyone. He was inclusive.”

Your brother scoffs. “Muslims deny the Lordship of our savior Jesus Christ,” he says. “They preach a false doctrine. Plus, you never know which one might turn out to be a terrorist. Why should we be good neighbors to them?”

This argument just adds another layer of complexity to your inner struggles. Five minutes ago, you were thinking to yourself, “Muslim dude is a pretty good ballplayer, and this Ramadan thing is fascinating. Sure, I’ll go sit with him a few times over the next couple of weeks.” But now your Christian identity is involved. Are Christians supposed to be good neighbors to people who don’t believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior as your mother believes, or shun them as your brother says? Come to think of it, you’ve heard that “Lord and Savior” phrase repeated every Sunday at church since you can remember. But now, in the light of realizing somebody else doesn’t believe it, you are wondering whether you really believe it yourself. If you decide that you don’t believe it, do you have to go to church next Sunday?

Let’s take a step back and see how social theory illuminates this sketch. The introduction of diversity into the life of the white, male Methodist teenager in the largely Methodist town has raised three questions: Who am I? Who are you? How do we relate to each other? When everybody around you is the same, you don’t have to ask these questions. But once you come into contact with people who are different, those three questions begin to play in a loop in your mind. As the social theorist Anthony Giddens writes, “[In modernity] the self has become a *reflexive* project.”³

Now let's consider this scenario from the perspective of the young Muslim. Imagine that you're him, and you've just moved into this town. In an area where just about everybody else goes to church on Sunday and doesn't seem to have any dietary restrictions, you are wondering why you have to fast for Ramadan and go to *jumma* prayers on Friday afternoons. When your parents came in to talk to the school principal about leaving school early on Friday, he was friendly, respectful, and accommodating. But your math teacher was different. He has mispronounced your name since the day you arrived, on purpose it seems, and was icy cold when you handed him the note from your parents, signed by the principal, about missing class on Fridays for prayers.

The whole thing made you feel uncomfortable, hyperaware of not only how you are different from others but how they are looking at you. Like everyone else, you hear the reports of Muslims being involved with terrorism, but you feel totally disconnected from those people, as if they are not even part of the same universe and certainly not the same religion. Yet, shockingly, other people put you in the same category with those murderers. A girl in your history class last week said her dad read a headline about a Muslim extremist group murdering Christians in the Middle East and said, "You know it's their religion that makes them that way. They're all like that."

Thank God for basketball. It's been a way of connecting with folks in this town. One of the guys who lives nearby and is a regular on the court asked you why you haven't been around lately. Mentioning Ramadan just kind of came out. Afterward, you wondered if you should have said something else, covered up what you were really doing. But he seemed cool about it. You've seen him and his family walk into the Methodist church on Sunday. You wonder if church is like *masjid*, and if Christian prayer is like Muslim prayer. When Ramadan is over and you go back to playing basketball in the afternoon, maybe you could ask that guy what goes on at church. In the back of your mind, though, you can't help but wonder if you are misreading the situation. What if your neighbor's curiosity about Ramadan is not a sign of kindness? What if he doesn't like Muslims, like your math teacher, or the girl's father who thinks all Muslims want to kill Christians?

One Friday, the imam who preaches at *jumma* pulls you close after prayers and warns you not to get too close to the Christians in this town.

Their religion and culture is different, he says. You must stick close to your own values and practices. “What do they do in church?” you ask him.

“They never mention the Prophet Muhammad or the Qur’an and they say that Jesus is God,” the imam responds sharply. “Associating any figure or object with God is *shirk*, unforgivable.” You regret asking him the question.

You see the imam talking to your father outside. He is wagging his finger and saying that he is concerned you are getting too curious about Christians, maybe too close to them. He knows of a boarding school for young Muslims in America. Students there study math, science, and history, but also Qur’an and Hadith. They are taught the respect for Christians and Christianity that is rooted in the Qur’an, but they are not tempted by the presence of Christians to adopt their beliefs and practices.

Your father says to him sternly that the Prophet Muhammad was helped by many Christians in his mission. The family has felt welcomed by this community. They hope to build positive relationships with the Christians in this town by highlighting common ground. There are, for example, many Christian organizations here that serve the poor. He has been planning to bring his family to volunteer and highlight the shared Christian-Muslim value of helping those who are less fortunate.

The presence of diversity has set in motion a similar set of questions for both the young Muslim and the young Methodist, but they experience the intensity of those questions differently. There is a dramatic power difference between the two. The Methodist is part of the majority and gets to ask reflexive questions from the comfort of a world that understands his ways of being, believing, and belonging, where he has friends, where no one mispronounces his name. The young Muslim is in the minority and regards the young Methodist with some envy. It must be nice to be born into a world where you fit in. Not only is he as a Muslim different, his particular difference is viewed with suspicion. The “Who am I? Who are you? How do we relate to each other?” questions are common, but they are experienced in different ways depending on whether you are in the majority or in the minority.

CONTINUITY OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Let’s consider this situation from the position of the minister at the Methodist church. Members of your congregation have seemed restless

lately. You've noticed that fewer teenagers are showing up on Sunday mornings. One father tells you that his son simply says, "Look, Dad, if you want to go to church, go. I'm just making a different choice." The father wants you to talk to his son. He is fuming and says, "Church as a choice? Who ever heard of that? God says you go to church—you go. That's what our family has done in this town for generations."

Modernity, writes Berger, poses a particular challenge to religious communities. The presence of alternative ways of being, believing, and belonging means that religious communities lose their "taken for granted" status.⁴ Where it was once unthinkable to not attend church or be a Methodist in this town, the presence of people who do things differently makes other options viable. Religious communities in the situation of modernity become "voluntary associations," meaning that they need to compete for the attention of people who have a whole set of other options. Where once people understood their identity as fate, they now experience it as choice.

This shift is one of the most significant consequences of modernity. Here is how Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Britain, explains it: "Long gone are the days when our identities, beliefs and life chances were narrowly circumscribed by where and to whom we happened to be born. We are no longer actors in a play written by tradition and directed by community, in which roles are allocated by accidents of birth. Instead, careers, relationships and lifestyles have become things we freely choose from a superstore of alternatives."⁵

As you listen to the father, you realize similar conversations are happening in homes all around this town. Some teenagers have stopped showing up at church altogether. Another group has taken to arriving early and sitting up front, wearing their Christian identities on their sleeves. The leader of that group approached you recently and asked you to point to the verses in the Bible that say Islam is wrong. You gently tell him that Islam emerged hundreds of years after the Bible was written, so it's not mentioned there at all. "But Islam is wrong, right?" the teenager blurts out.

The presence of the Muslim family seems to be inspiring all sorts of questions and causing all kinds of consternation. You are not exactly sure how to respond. Should you try to change things to make church more interesting for younger folks? If so, which group of younger folks—the ones who are no longer coming to church or the ones who are showing up

early and demanding that you denounce Islam? Would changing things upset the older generation, like the father who spoke to you? Clearly, the way things are suits many of them. Also, how much should you talk about Islam and Muslims from the pulpit? You know the answer to this question is, "More." But your knowledge about the subject is pretty thin. The problem is, the people in the church who seem most comfortable talking about Islam and Muslims are the ones who know only negative things about the religion. You doubt they were all Islamic studies majors in college. More likely they are reading newsletters from organizations whose purpose is to spread ugliness about another religion and culture. All of this brings you to a big idea: you'll go see the imam who comes to town on Fridays to preach at Muslim services. Maybe you can get him to come to your church and do a guest presentation; that way, more of your congregation will meet a real, live Muslim. Furthermore, as a fellow religious leader, maybe he is experiencing some of the same generational challenges that you are. It will be fun to find out.

Let's switch characters again. I want you to imagine this conversation from the point of view of the imam, a recent immigrant from Pakistan who works professionally as an engineer and takes Fridays off to travel to various towns in the region giving *khutbas* (sermons at Muslim prayer gatherings).

You are surprised to receive a phone call from a woman who introduces herself as the minister of the local Methodist church and requests a meeting at the local coffee shop. When you arrive, she buys your coffee and is extremely friendly. She shakes your hand vigorously. Generally, you don't shake hands with women, but it seems very out of place to tell her that, so you nervously allow her to pump your hand up and down. You are hoping she doesn't try to hug you at some point. That you will not do. As she begins talking, you are plotting in your mind how to escape an attempted hug and not come across as rude.

She sips her coffee and talks about the challenges she is facing in her church. Some of the young people are saying they do not want to come anymore and others have taken a somewhat fundamentalist turn. The older generation is not happy about any of this. Much of the issue centers around the new Muslim family that has moved into the neighborhood. You know this family. You tried to talk some sense into the father just last week about how to ensure that his children follow the straight path of Islam instead of

being tempted by Christianity and American culture. Instead of thanking you, the father basically told you to back off.

The Methodist minister keeps on saying that change is good; she welcomes it. She wants to have dialogues between the generations. She wants to have open discussions about Islam, especially about how Jesus is shared between the two religions. On the one hand, you appreciate that she seems to want to know positive things about Islam, but you are suspicious of her general attitude. In your view, the kind of changes she is talking about—young people rejecting religion, discord between parents and children—is not good. Open discussion is certainly not the solution to such problems. The solution is to reiterate loudly and clearly what the truth is and to tell people that, if they don't follow it, there will be dire consequences. This Jesus talk is also making you uncomfortable, especially as she seems to combine it with an invitation to attend her church. Is this her way of trying to convert you? She seems too nice to be engaging in a bait and switch, but some of your Muslim friends have said that Christians will do anything to convert Muslims. Maybe the fact that she is a woman is throwing you off. You are not used to meeting with women in this way, and a woman wearing a religious collar is especially new for you. You do a lot of nodding during the meeting. At the end, your fear comes true—she leans in to hug you. You back away, but she doesn't seem to notice. You feel her hands touching your shoulders. You sense that she does not mean to make you uncomfortable, but while walking back to your car, your feelings bounce between guilt, frustration, and anger. Why did you not stand up for your values and your religion during that meeting?

As you drive away, you are remembering a town hall meeting you attended a few months ago in a nearby city. A man stood up and introduced himself as a conservative Catholic. A few people in the crowd hissed, but the man stood tall and proud. He started off by saying that he saw changes happening in the town and he didn't like those changes. He didn't like that the school play had a kissing scene and that a youth club had an openly gay leader. He didn't like the new people moving in, with their strange un-Christian ways. At a local restaurant, he saw a teenage girl talk back to her father, and the dad just sat there and took it. He insisted that would never have happened when he was growing up. He wanted to say out loud to everyone that he knew of a Catholic academy a few miles away whose academic and extracurricular program was focused on Christian living.

There was no kissing in school plays and no talking back to authority figures. He would be enrolling his children there in the fall. If anyone else in the crowd was interested, they could see him.

You cannot help but contrast what you heard from that man with the conversation you just had with the Methodist minister. The Methodist minister was open and friendly and seemed to want to learn about Islam, while the Catholic man was certainly implying that part of the change he didn't like was Muslims moving into the area. Still, you felt a sense of kinship with the Catholic man. Your general orientation and attitude are much closer to his than that of the Methodist minister. Like him, you don't like many of the changes you are seeing. Like him, you don't think that kissing between unmarried teenagers, openly gay youth leaders, or talking back to authority figures should be tolerated, much less rewarded with understanding and open discussion. Like him, making sure the children in your charge follow God's law is your highest priority. You especially admired the way he stood proudly for his religion, no matter what some other people in the room might have thought. After the town hall, you went home and Googled the Catholic academy the man was referring to. You loved what you saw—the orientation, if not the content. You started Googling around for parallel Muslim institutions and nearly jumped for joy when you found one. You have long been concerned that raising Muslim children in largely Christian environments will lead some of them to convert from Islam. Now you have a solution to both the presence of Christians and the negative aspects of American culture. All you have to do is convince some of the Muslim parents in the area to give it a try.

For a moment, let's switch back to the position of the Methodist minister.

You probably should not have hugged the imam, you think to yourself as you get into your car. The man was clearly uncomfortable with that. But come to think of it, he seemed uncomfortable the whole time. He barely moved when you respectfully extended your hand to shake his, he didn't look at you when you were talking, and he didn't respond to any of your ideas—ideas whose goal was to help people in your congregation better understand *his* religion.

Was it because you were an educated female religious leader? You turn the scene over in your mind, look at it from various angles, and conclude that the answer is inescapably yes. This frustrates you. Here you are reaching out to the newcomer community, just as you are called to do by the

Gospel, and in return you get treated with sexist disrespect. You remember a male classmate at divinity school saying that women shouldn't be ministers. God had created men and women with different aptitudes and different roles. You and the other female divinity school students let him have it. Most of the men in the class supported you. You vowed to yourself that anytime sexism reared its ugly head, you would go after it. God created people equal; that is also the Gospel as you understand it. So, then, why hadn't you called out the Muslim imam when he was clearly giving off the vibe that you were a second-class citizen?

MICROENVIRONMENTS

Let's turn again and play a different role. Now I want you to imagine that you are the principal of the high school that the young Muslim and the young Methodist attend. The parents of the Muslim family came to see you a few months ago. You asked how they were adjusting to life in the town and they said quite well. As an African American who moved to this largely white community a decade back, you can sympathize with the position of the newcomer. The Muslim parents were very grateful for your support in letting their son out of class on Friday afternoons for prayer, and they are here to see you about another matter related to their faith. The food served in the cafeteria at school sometimes poses a problem. Once a week or so, the main item has pork in it—sausage pizza, pork hot dogs—and on those days, their kids came home hungry. Could the principal ensure that at least one main dish a day was pork-free? Abstaining from pork was an important part of their religion. Incidentally, the mother noted, most Jews do not eat pork either. So as this town and its school diversify, having a non-pork option will be good for both Jews and Muslims.

You thought this was a fine idea. You made the change and noted it in the weekly e-mail you sent to parents. That caused a problem that you did not foresee. A group of parents scheduled a meeting with you and accused you of caving to the demands of Sharia in the school. "Sharia?" you asked. "What does this have to do with Sharia?"

"Muslim law is evil," retorted one of the parents. "It starts with no pork and ends up with Christians getting executed."

This is sounding an awful lot like racism to you. These people have seen ugly things about Muslims on the evening news, and they are projecting

that narrow information onto all the Muslims in the world. It's a dynamic that black people are all too familiar with.

“My sister married a Muslim,” you tell the group of parents in your office. “He is a decorated officer in the United States Navy who respects my sister's Christian faith. She still goes to church every Sunday.” That quiets them down for the moment, but you get the sense that this is not the last time you will have this conversation with this group.

You call your friend who is a high school principal in a far more diverse area, the kind of diversity that has yet to arrive in your town but is certainly coming. The two of you went to grad school together, and you had many discussions about the beauty of diversity and how excited you were to lead educational environments with teenagers and parents with a range of identities. You remember feeling a bit of envy when your friend got the job at the diverse high school. She would have a chance to put those grad school visions into practice.

Turns out that the reality is far more complicated than the dream. Your principal friend says that there are many wonderful things about the religious diversity of her school, but many frustrations as well. Increasingly, her school is balkanized by faith group—Jewish kids here, evangelical kids there, Muslims at their own table. During the most recent war in Gaza, a Jewish kid refused to be in the same math group as a Muslim, calling him a supporter of terrorism. The next morning, a bunch of lockers belonging to Jewish students were defaced, one with a Nazi symbol. During that time, some of the evangelicals wore shirts from the organization Christians United For Israel, forming close relationships with the Jews. But when a group of Reform Jewish girls came back wearing bracelets from a pro-choice rally, the evangelicals held a very public moment of silence for the victims of abortion, followed by a loud prayer asking “Jesus to forgive the sinners who support murder.” That led to a screaming match in the girls' bathroom. During this same time, the Gay-Straight Alliance at the school was planning its annual event, and she had heard whispers that an evangelical-Muslim alliance was preparing a loud protest. To complicate matters further, a group of parents had started an “atheist parent support group,” apparently frustrated that issues relating to religion were becoming an increasingly large part of the school culture. After a recent PTA meeting at which religious issues took up half the agenda, one of the atheist parents stood up and said that if this continued, he would sue the school for

violating the separation of church and state. Before sitting down, he added, “Believing in religion is like believing in the Tooth Fairy. Grow up, people. Join the twenty-first century.” It took ten full minutes to regain order after that zinger.

As you listen to your friend describe the situation in her high school, a couple of things occur to you. First, for all the talk about diversity in grad school, almost none of it had to do with the type of diversity you and your friend are now dealing with—religious diversity. This is not to say that the issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality are any easier to deal with, only that you expected those to be thorny and to be prepared for them. Listening to the stories your friend tells and knowing this diversity will come to your school sooner rather than later, you wish you had a framework for how to deal with conflicts based on diverse faith and philosophical convictions.

Second, while all the talk in grad school was about the beauty of diversity, your friend’s stories illustrate that diversity isn’t always or necessarily positive. As you read the paper the next morning, that point seems obvious to you. After all, many of the world’s violent conflicts are between different religious groups within the same country or region. You find yourself repeating a simple line to yourself as if it’s a revelation—diverse environments can quite easily become violent conflicts. You wonder why this was rarely framed as such in grad school.

You begin to do some reading on religious diversity as it relates to a microenvironment like a high school. You find the work of Diana Eck especially useful when it comes to a theoretical framework for religious diversity. Eck points out that phrases like “celebrate diversity” and “diversity is our strength” misunderstand the term “diversity,” undeservedly investing it with a positive meaning.⁶ Diversity, according to Eck, ought to be understood as a neutral term with a range of possible consequences, everything from conflict to cooperation. When diversity is proactively engaged for positive ends, Eck calls it “pluralism.” Simply put, diversity is a fact; pluralism is an achievement, one that must be worked at.

How do you positively engage diversity within a microenvironment like a high school to achieve pluralism? You and your principal friend used to assume that simply putting people with different identities in the same school with one another would somehow naturally facilitate positive relationships. In your own observations as a professional educator, that has

never really held true. People self-segregate by identity group all the time. You see this at everything from seating at football games to seating in the lunchroom. Mostly this is harmless, but if a few kids from different identity groups have a beef with one another, too often their respective groups get involved and the conflict immediately escalates.

In your reading, you discover that there is scholarly literature on intergroup relations known as “contact theory.” One of the key figures in this literature is Gordon Allport.⁷ In his research, he discovered that simply throwing people with different identities into a microenvironment like a high school did not necessarily lead to good relationships between identity groups, especially those who had a history of tension or conflict. For positive relations to ensue, the microenvironment had to meet certain conditions: equal status between the parties, cooperation between the groups, common goals, and support by authorities.

In further reading into contact theory, you discover a study by Muzafer Sherif that illustrates Allport’s theory.⁸ Sherif and his team brought a group of boys to a summer camp called Robbers Cave. They separated the boys into two groups and organized activities intended to create intragroup solidarity and intergroup rivalry. The researchers intensified this polarization by giving preferential treatment to one group. They were surprised by how quickly the two groups of boys developed a sense of identity within their respective groups and antagonism to the other group. The hostility was so deep that violence broke out at some of the activities.

What really struck you as you read Sherif’s work was how the researchers turned the situation around. The formula was simple, actually, and it pretty much followed Allport’s theory: organize activities where the groups have to cooperate for a common goal. When the bus broke down on a trip to the swimming hole and the boys had to work together to get it out of a ditch, the sense of intergroup solidarity increased markedly.

You talk excitedly with your friends about your discoveries, and one of them refers you to the “Pal Al” section of Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s book *American Grace*.⁹ The book is a comprehensive look at American religion from the middle of the twentieth century to the present day. The question the authors seek to answer is how does a country that is both religiously diverse and devout, like the United States, avoid violent religious hostilities. The answer, they say, is that people in the United States have frequent occasions to develop positive, meaningful relationships with

people from other religious communities. A friendship with even one member of a suspect or marginalized religious group can improve somebody's attitude toward the whole group. In fact, the Putnam and Campbell research showed that a friendship with someone from one minority religious group changes people's attitudes toward *other* minority religious groups. Befriending a Buddhist causes improved views toward Mormons, Muslims, and Hindus.

The lesson for your high school as its religious diversity increases is clear: be proactive about creating programs where students with diverse religious identities have to cooperate to achieve common goals. That is relatively easy to do at the student level. Everything from arts programs to volunteer projects to sports are possible level playing fields where cooperation is required, goals are shared, and lasting friendships can be formed. The problem is going to be with the parents and other community leaders. Will they (the all-important "authorities" that Allport says need to sanction the process) uniformly support these programs when some of them clearly have prejudices toward certain religious minorities?

MACROENVIRONMENTS

Finally, I want you to imagine yourself as the official leading the Department of Homeland Security's Faith Office. You have degrees in religion and international affairs, and your first posting was at the State Department, where your job was to advise the secretary of state on the various ways that religious issues were likely to have an impact on America's interests abroad. You switched over to the domestic side and came to lead the Faith Office at Homeland Security for two reasons: (1) you have a growing concern that conflict between religious groups abroad will cause tension between diaspora communities in the United States, and (2) the Department of Homeland Security oversees disaster relief efforts in the United States through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). After the government and the Red Cross, faith-based groups like the Southern Baptists and the Salvation Army are the largest disaster relief organizations in the country.¹⁰ In your time at the State Department, you saw diverse faith groups cooperate on a range of international disasters, momentarily putting their differences aside to provide aid to victims. If earthquakes could bring Christian, Muslim, and Hindu groups together in

South Asia, then dealing with the aftermath of hurricanes might be a way of bringing diverse faith groups together in the American South. And if you do your job well, cooperating across religious lines after a disaster might be the first step to more long-term, sustained, interfaith relationships.

When you added religion to your international affairs major, your friends laughed at you. It was the 1990s and you were part of a group of ambitious, high-achieving students who harbored dreams of being senior diplomats. It was an especially heady time for you as a woman because Madeleine Albright was secretary of state. She was the first woman to hold the position, and you couldn't help but think to yourself: if she can do it, I can do it.

Most of your classes focused on how to build democratic institutions and transition from state-run economies to free markets in Eastern Europe. But you were taken by Samuel Huntington's 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, "The Clash of Civilizations." Huntington believed that the increased interactions between people from different backgrounds brought about by globalization would heighten their sense of "civilizational identity." This dynamic would put deep differences into sharp relief. As Huntington wrote, "Differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. . . . The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy."¹¹

Civilizational identities were made up of many things, but the most important element, according to Huntington, was religion. And religious differences, Huntington believed, ran especially deep and were particularly divisive. "Religion discriminates sharply and exclusively among people," he wrote.¹² Bottom line: the post-Cold War era, Huntington warned, would be dominated by religious conflict.

You agreed with Huntington's premise that religion mattered a great deal to a great many people and a smaller world brought those people into greater contact with one another, but you were skeptical about his conclusion that religious differences somehow had to lead to violent conflict. At least, you hoped that violence was not the inevitable consequence of increased interaction. Part of this was your reading of world affairs and part of it stemmed from being a devout Catholic. You rarely

shared this part of your identity with your classmates and professors in the international affairs department. You had heard them scoff that religious people were part of “the flat earth society,” and you had no desire to be thought ill of in that hypercompetitive environment. Still, you couldn’t put away your religious identity when thinking about your policy positions. You remember how inspired you felt when you saw pictures of Pope John Paul II’s trip to Poland in 1979, when he told the Polish people under Communist rule to “be not afraid.” You were certain the pope’s presence played a role in inspiring anti-Soviet movements in Poland. Maybe, as Stalin famously said, the pope did not command army divisions, but he certainly commanded people’s hearts. And not just Catholic hearts. Growing up in a largely Methodist town, your best friend was another religious minority, a Muslim, and he was deeply moved by Pope John Paul II’s visit to a mosque.

You were just beginning your career at the State Department when 9/11 happened. All of a sudden, Huntington was in vogue in foreign policy circles. People you knew were constantly quoting his line, “Islam has bloody borders.” In your view, that was a dangerous conclusion to draw. No doubt the terrorism threat from certain Muslim groups was real, but Islam was an ancient, diverse tradition with 1.5 billion adherents. Looking at it entirely through the prism of terrorism was like looking at Catholicism only through the window of pedophile priests. You were happy that foreign affairs types were finally paying attention to religion, but you were concerned that the focus would be limited to a superficial and wrong-headed “Islam is dangerous” worldview.

A few months after 9/11, in February 2002, rioting in the western Indian state of Gujarat left a thousand Muslims dead. The more you read about the riots, the more you were convinced that they were not random bursts of emotion but a highly organized campaign by Hindu nationalist militias. There was even evidence of the government in Gujarat aiding and abetting horrific acts, like the rape of women and the burning of children. As an Indian American yourself, you had long taken pride in India’s image as a religiously diverse nation whose disparate elements came together to form a larger whole. In fact, you saw profound similarities between India and the United States on this matter. But the combination of anti-Muslim violence in India and anti-Muslim prejudice in the United States was causing you

concern for both the nation of your heritage and the nation of your citizenship.

You began to take a deep interest in how to ensure stability in religiously diverse democracies. One of the books that you found especially useful was *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, Ashutosh Varshney's study of cities in India that experienced various kinds of tension between different religious groups. The key question Varshney asked was "Why do some cities explode in violence when tensions between different religious groups rise while other cities manage to remain peaceful?" The answer had everything to do with civic networks. Cities that had Rotary clubs, sports leagues, business groups, and other sorts of civic associations that brought together people from different faith groups managed to ride out religious tension without becoming violent (in Varshney's usage, the term "ethnicity" encompasses religious identity). Cities that did not have such networks were prone to deadly interfaith riots. As Varshney put it, "If engagement is only *intraethnic*, not *interethnic*, small tremors (unconfirmed rumors, victories and defeats in sports) can unleash torrents of violence. A multiethnic society with few interconnections across ethnic boundaries is very vulnerable to ethnic disorders and violence."¹³ Networks of engagement don't fall from the sky; people build them. It was inspiring that India had civic leaders who took the time to create and nurture groups that brought people of different faiths together. If only there were more such leaders.

India was full of identity communities—ethnic, tribal, regional, linguistic—but it seemed as if religious identity had the most potent social impact. Why was that? It was reading the work of the sociologist Robert Putnam in preparation for taking the Homeland Security job that helped answer this question. In his landmark book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam points out that religious groups are likely the single largest source of social capital in American society. He writes, "Nearly half of all associational memberships in America are church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context."¹⁴ Moreover, faith communities "provide an important incubator for civic skills, civic norms, community interests, and civic recruitment. Religiously active men and women learn to give speeches, run meetings, manage disagreements, and bear administrative responsibility."¹⁵ While Putnam's study focused on the United States, your own experience traveling back to

India indicated that faith groups there were enormous sources of social capital as well.

In his book *Better Together*, Putnam distinguishes between two forms of social capital in a diverse society. “Bonded” social capital is inward focused and frequently associated with a tight-knit identity group, like a religious community. “Bridged” social capital is outward facing and involves working together across lines of difference.¹⁶ These two are not mutually exclusive. “Bonding” often generates the social capital used in “bridging.” Think of a church group that gathers every Sunday for worship and every Wednesday for Bible study, and then one Saturday a month mobilizes its membership to participate in interfaith Habitat for Humanity building projects. The internal bonding of those Sundays and Wednesdays generates the social capital used for interfaith bridging on Habitat for Humanity Saturdays.

Both of these insights—the powerful social capital within religious groups, and the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital—shed light on the dynamics of India, and helped you prepare for your new role at Homeland Security in the United States. It was clear from Varshney’s study that the deep pockets of social capital within religious communities in India cut two ways. On the one hand, in times of tension between those groups, this social capital (large groups of people who can be easily mobilized, physical spaces to hold events, money and other resources, an expectation of participation, leaders who are respected and heeded, social networking mechanisms that communicate quickly and broadly) turned quickly into the tools of interfaith violence. On the other hand, this exact same social capital can become the building blocks of a rich civic life for the broader city. A Muslim social networking site could be used to gather youth into a mosque for the purpose of rallying them to fight the Christians in the next neighborhood. That same communications technology and physical space can be used to organize a basketball tournament for young people from all backgrounds. The cities that were most prone to violence were the ones with the most bonded social capital and the least bridged social capital. When tensions ran high, bonded social capital—groups made up of people with a single strong identity—effectively served as easy-to-mobilize militias with guns pointed at the opposing identity group. Bridged social capital, on the other hand, interrupted, reduced, and prevented such violence.

A final study by Robert Putnam, titled “*E Pluribus Unum*,” caught your eye. Putnam found that diversity, while not necessarily leading to violence, does have a negative impact on the broader community. He writes,

Inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, distrust their neighbors, regardless of the color of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more but have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television . . . Diversity, at least in the short run, brings out the turtle in all of us.¹⁷

More than anything else, this study inspires you to be proactive in your leadership. Diversity, when left alone, tends toward isolation. This is bad for a participatory democracy, which relies on engaged citizens. Even more dangerous, the vacuum created by people withdrawing from public life is filled too easily by demagogues spreading the poison of prejudice and division. When divisive messages meet bonded social capital in an environment where diversity is unengaged, things can turn ugly fast, as the case of Gujarat in 2002 illustrates all too well. But there is another side to this social science. Proactive leadership can make a big difference. Finding ways to mobilize the networks within different religious communities for a common cause builds “networks of engagement” that bridge social capital and strengthen social cohesion. In disaster relief, you think you’ve found a cause that will inspire different religious groups to bring their particular networks to a common table, build bridges across lines of religious difference, make an impact on an issue they all care about, and strengthen America along the way. This last part you pull from Putnam’s “*E Pluribus Unum*” study. While much of that paper is about the short-term negative consequences of diversity, toward the end Putnam highlights a key strategy for engaging diversity in a way that creates long-term benefits—shape a national narrative that includes people of all identities and encourages them to offer their particular contributions to the broader whole.

You get to work writing your invitation letters. You title the task force you are creating “Achieving America: An Interfaith Council for the Common Good.” You begin each letter with a paragraph on how you have been personally inspired by that tradition’s ethic of service. For the letters to Muslim leaders, you cite the Qur’an and the Hadith. For the letters to Jewish leaders, you cite the Torah and Rabbi Hillel. And so on. Your letter

ends with a line from George Washington: “May the Lord of all mercies scatter light and not darkness and make each of us useful in our vocations and give us everlasting happiness in his own way.” You want to remind people that at the heart of the American narrative is the belief that communities from the four corners of the earth, speaking different languages and praying in different ways (including never praying), can come together and build a nation. You wish Samuel Huntington had recognized that the best counterexample to the clash of civilizations was the possibility of America.

SUMMARY

We began this chapter with Peter Berger’s key insight that modernity pluralizes, a dynamic that makes the inner lives of individuals highly complex because it shifts identity from fate to choice. Pluralization also puts pressure on religious communities, which no longer enjoy a taken-for-granted status and now must understand themselves as voluntary associations. Pluralization not only has implications for the identities of individuals and communities, but also makes relations between them a highly salient feature of the modern world. According to scholars like Samuel Huntington, increased interaction between people from different religious backgrounds is likely to lead to conflict, his famous “clash of civilizations.” Other scholars like Robert Putnam find that while diversity does not have to lead to conflict, it does tend to cause people to participate less in civil society. Such insights lead scholars like Diana Eck to draw a distinction between diversity and pluralism: diversity is simply the fact of people with different identities in intense interaction; pluralism is the achievement of understanding and cooperation.¹⁸ For diversity to become pluralism, it must be positively and proactively engaged. It is especially important to engage religious diversity because of the social capital within religious communities and the bonding nature of religious identity. There are a variety of ways of engaging religious diversity positively. One is to create microenvironments where people from different backgrounds are more likely to cooperate together toward common goals and form prejudice-busting relationships in the process. Another is to proactively bridge the social capital (in Putnam’s language) between religious groups by forming what Ashutosh Varshney calls “networks of engagement,” or

strong associations that involve people from different identity groups. Such networks not only strengthen social cohesion and bridge social capital, but have been shown to prevent violence. A final strategy for engaging diversity to build pluralism is to create an overarching narrative that includes a variety of groups and that encourages constituent communities to make contributions to the broader common good.

The character sketches that I provided illustrate the four most common ways of proactively responding to diversity: by building barriers or bunkers, by wielding bludgeons, or by carefully constructing bridges. Next, I briefly define each response and refer to how the characters I sketched in this chapter illustrate them.

Barriers

People who build barriers are interested in proudly proclaiming the righteousness of their identity and loudly denouncing other identities. They amplify differences and disagreements in a manner that is scornful of others. The attitude boils down to this: “In a world of different paths, I am on the one that is good and right. Everyone else is walking a road that is ugly and evil.” The barrier response is best embodied by the brother of the Methodist teenager who says he should not be friends with the Muslim, and by the Methodist youth who asks the pastor if the Bible says Islam is evil.

Bunkers

People who build bunkers want to seal themselves off from a world of diversity. Like those who build barriers, they believe their path is the best one, but they are neither overtly scornful toward others nor especially interested in accentuating differences. For the most part, they are not that interested in others at all. They are fully focused on preserving their own practices and traditions. The Muslim imam and the Catholic man who speaks at the town hall meeting are examples of people who seek to build bunkers.

Bludgeons

Those whose response to diversity is the bludgeon are violently antagonistic toward people who are different. Like those who build barriers, they are self-righteous about their own superiority, accentuating differences and scorning others. What distinguishes them from barrier builders is their willingness to use physical force to dominate those who are different. It's not "my way or the highway"; it's "my way or get beat over the head." Nobody in the sketches represents the bludgeon approach. Frankly, it is rare in contemporary American life. Muslim extremists like Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Taliban are the most common examples in our era of religious groups who respond to diversity with a bludgeon.

Bridges

There are several characters whose instincts are to respond to diversity by seeking to build bridges of understanding and cooperation. They experience various levels of frustration, opposition, and success. The Methodist teenager's mother thinks that being Christian means reaching out to the Muslim neighbor, but she has a hard time convincing her older son that her "bridge" interpretation of Methodist theology is more correct than his "barrier" understanding. The Muslim parents showed their bridge-building instincts by emphasizing how Muslims share a service ethic with Christians and dietary restrictions with Jews, but they have yet to take concrete steps to actually build the bridge. The Methodist minister takes a risk and reaches out to the Muslim imam, but finds that some of her values (feminism, openness to change) are in tension with his views on those issues. The principal is reading social psychology research with an eye toward running programs that can create an environment in his high school that transforms diversity into pluralism. He can imagine how arts, sports, and volunteer projects will help his students but is stumped by the challenge from parents who will oppose this proactive approach, at least when it comes to Muslims. The final character, the Catholic woman who runs Homeland Security's Faith Office, also has a sound strategy. She is familiar with religious diversity frameworks through her reading of Huntington, Varshney, and Putnam. She is knowledgeable about both the service ethic in different religions and how this is put into practice in an area like disaster relief. Her "Achieving America" task force is a promising plan. She takes care to write letters that show respect for the particular service ethic in each

faith tradition; highlights the relationship building that will take place while applying this service ethic in disaster relief efforts; and lifts up how their cooperation strengthens and celebrates the core American narrative of diverse groups working together. Will she have the skills to actually coordinate interfaith disaster relief efforts? After all, coming up with a plan is one thing; executing it is an entirely different thing. What happens if one of the faith groups that participates in the council begins to proselytize during one of the interfaith disaster relief efforts? What happens if a few of the groups send hundreds of volunteers and other groups send only a few? Does everyone get the same credit? These are the kinds of challenges inherent in real-world interfaith leadership.

A final note: In the metaphor at the center of this book, the “stones” of historical and theological knowledge are placed end to end to build interfaith bridges. But, in the vast realms of history and theology, one can easily find stones that are suited to form bunkers or barriers. And the same skills (public narrative, group facilitation) that connect stones into a bridge of cooperation can be used to turn those rocks into bludgeons of domination.