

Preface

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THIS BOOK IS THE FIRST FRUITS of a revolution, the most important and ultimately consequential revolution of our time: the interfaith revolution. Gone are the days when we could imagine that the religious worlds of our various families of faith do not overlap and intersect. The encounter of people of different faiths is the hallmark of our times. It may be a dangerous encounter where difference is wielded as a weapon of conflict. It may be a passive and inattentive encounter where difference is glossed over or avoided. Or it may be an intentional encounter, where people of different faiths set out to get to know one another—to work together, talk together, and serve together in the hard work of bridge-building. Whether we analyze the religious dynamics of the world of the twenty-first century from a global, national, or local standpoint, ours is a world of profound diversity, a world marbled with many ethnic groups, cultural traditions, and families of faith. Immigration has changed the demographics of our societies, including that of the United States and Canada and made us aware of the interfaith challenge as never before.

The generation of young adults whose interfaith initiatives and projects have been gathered into this volume are the leading edge of this revolution. The multiple sources that have given rise to these projects and the converging energy they represent are signals of a broad and significant movement. After all, a movement is not a single organization. In fact, it is not an organization at all. It has no single center, but is constituted by a multiform energy moving in the same direction, producing powerful currents, gradually reshaping the landscape.

This generation of young people is what we might call the first “interfaith generation.” Anyone under thirty today in the U.S. and Canada has grown up in a religious and cultural world markedly different from that of their parents. For those of us in the United States, the newest wave of immigration, beginning in 1965 with the Immigration and Naturalization Act, has brought people from every part of the world and every religious

tradition to our shores. For all of us, these past decades have meant the re-framing of our "we" as Americans, recognizing in new ways an enlarged and more diverse national community. These decades have also challenged us as never before to live up to our promise of religious freedom and freedom of conscience. These have been both exciting and turbulent times. As our religious landscape has become more complex, interfaith councils, Abrahamic dialogues, interfaith services, and interfaith service projects have become part of that landscape in cities and towns all over America.

For the "interfaith generation," this new multireligious America has been the very sea in which they swim. They have lived it, grown up with it. They have gone to high school with a far more diverse student body than their parents. They have entered college and, by now, entered the workforce with friends, fellow students, and co-workers from many religious traditions. This generation does not need to be convinced of the challenge of religious identity in a multireligious society. It is the clear, everyday challenge of their social and civic world. While their parents and grandparents may not be as alert to the full impact of our increasingly multireligious society, students and young adults have known this reality from their schooldays on.

Over the past two decades, I have taught a course at Harvard University called "World Religions, Diversity, and Dialogue." We study the ways in which people in each tradition articulate and interpret their faith in the fast-paced and fast-changing world in which we now live. And we ask how people in each tradition think about the "religious other." How do Christians or Muslims, Jews or Hindus, address religious difference? Is religious difference a problem to be solved? Does the religious "other" represent an opportunity for mission? An opportunity for engagement and learning? An opportunity to "compete in righteousness," as some Muslims would say? At the beginning of the course, I ask each student to write an essay about the most significant encounter he or she has had with a person of another faith. What was the nature of the encounter? Why was it significant? For those who are not religious, I ask them to write about an encounter with someone who is.

The range of responses, which I have collected over the years, gives us a glimpse of just how deep in this generation the interfaith encounter goes. In the mid-1980s, there were Baptists who wrote of their encounter with Catholics, Jews who wrote of their friends who were Lutheran. There was the Methodist boy who had traveled to India and was stopped in his tracks by his encounter with Hindu ritual traditions in Banaras. By the mid-1990s, however, the encounter essays were becoming as complex as our society. "My mother is half-Filipino, half-Mexican, and a strict Catholic. My father is Chinese and his family members are devout Buddhists. This has been my life. While my parents agreed to raise us in the Catholic Church when they married, still my father could not forget the Buddhist practice that had long been part of his

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childhood and family. He taught us the ways of meditation, and I recall family trips to Buddhist temples, even as I was going to Sunday school and preparing for my first Holy Communion."

Another young woman wrote, "I didn't know about the Hindu temple in Pittsburgh until last summer, when my boyfriend, Vinay, a first-generation Indian-American took me to visit. He had attended Hindu summer camps in western Pennsylvania. I had attended Mass in my Roman Catholic Church every Sunday of my life. I had never been to a Hindu temple."

A Catholic student from Houston wrote about her best friend in high school, a Muslim girl, a brilliant soccer player, who sat out the end of the season on the bench because she was observing the Ramadan fast. Not eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset, she could not run up and down the field in the hot sun. Even so, her presence encouraged everyone—and so did the witness to her faith.

A Mormon sophomore wrote, "There we were in the dorm room—a Muslim, a Christian Scientist, a Catholic agnostic, and me. We sat eating pizza and planning our joint project on the Oslo Accords and Jerusalem." A Methodist student described his junior year rooming group: "We include a Pakistani Muslim, a non-practicing Hindu American, a Chinese with leanings toward Confucianism, a devout Evangelical Christian from South Africa, and me, a Methodist from Minnesota. We have, in a sense, formed an experiment in acceptance, understanding, and dialogue."

The diversity of cultural and faith backgrounds is noted by these students with some self-consciousness as they reflect on and write about their own experience. At the same time, this very diversity is taken for granted in the working environment of students today. Every meeting is, in one sense, an interfaith meeting—even if it is not explicitly named as such. Every class is, demographically, an interfaith class—even if it is a class in English literature.

The interfaith youth movement springs from this new reality and steers into it with all the energy, the questioning, the curiosity, and the commitment that comes with young adulthood. As this generation comes to leadership in religious and civic life, we might well expect that the interfaith movement will expand from a budding revolution to a widespread cultural consensus.