# A focus on getting along: respect, caring and diversity

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing inspiration from Joseph T. O'Connell's work on socio-cultural integration, this paper connects the notion of 'deep equality' with two broad lessons that can be taken from O'Connell's approach that pertain to the study of religious diversity in contemporary life. The first is the recognition of the amorphous nature of religious identity, and the second is the necessity to search for models of socio-cultural integration in the face of difference. These lessons are valuable in providing an alternative discourse of diversity that moves away from problematisation to collaboration.

## KEYWORDS

Joseph T. O'Connell; religious diversity; deep equality; religious identity; religious studies; sociology of religion; positive narratives; negotiation of difference; lived religion; the arts

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In his research on Sultanate Bengal, Joseph T. O'Connell (O'Connell, 2011) takes up an important focus: rather than dwelling on the religio-cultural obstacles to communally mixed activities, O'Connell seeks out forces and models for what he calls socio-cultural integrative potential. One such force is Chaitanya's Vaishnava *bhakti* movement, which O'Connell argues offered a 'kind of religious life that for many Hindus of respectable castes facilitated their participation in communally mixed activities' (O'Connell, 2011: 53). In this particular discussion O'Connell is careful to maintain language that is suggestive of ambiguity in relation to religion and religious identity: 'But to what extent the indigenous base population, especially in the forested and less intensively cultivated areas, could be considered either Brahmanic Hindu or Muslim at that time remains unclear, at least to me' (O'Connell, 2011: 51).

The focus of this contribution to the celebration of Joseph T. O'Connell's work and life is not on the finer points of his extensive scholarship. Rather, there are two lessons from his article *Chaitanya Vaishnava devotion (*bhakti*) and ethics as socially integrative in Sultanate Bengal* on which I'd like to focus. First, religious identity is amorphous and less rigid than it is often portrayed in scholarship and second, there is a disproportionate focus on divisions amongst people because of religion that overshadows the myriad ways in which people overcome difference in day to day life.

I come to this discussion from a particular vantage point: I am a sociologist of religion and a lawyer and bring to my research an interdisciplinary approach that is concerned not so much with theologies and the intricacies of religions, but rather with the way religion is socially constructed. By this I mean, as does Beckford (Beckford, 2003), an approach that acknowledges the socially and culturally situated nature of religion as a concept and as a practice. The definition of religion shifts over time and those shifts relate to power, in that 'what counts as "really religious" or "truly Christian" are authorized, challenged and replaced over time' (Beckford, 2003: 17). Sociologists are not concerned about the truth of people's practices and beliefs. This is not to suggest that such things are figments of people's imaginations, but that truth claims are bracketed when sociologists examine how religion operates in society, except to account for how they might drive religious actors in their social relationships. This academic study of religion is what Joseph T. O'Connell worked so hard to establish. As is evident from his work such an approach does not preclude the taking seriously those for whom religion is integral to life. But, what is of interest from this perspective is how people construct their religious identities and under what sorts to circumstances they articulate them.

I draw my reflections here from a seven year programme of research entitled the Religion and Diversity Project.[1] My particular project within the

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[1] 'Religious Diversity and Its Limits: Moving Beyond Tolerance and Accommodation', known as the 'Religion and Diversity Project' is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research

programme of research has been to articulate the notion of 'deep equality', which, rather than focusing on law and its potential to regulate diversity, explores the ways in which people work out difference and diversity in everyday life.[2] Though this notion of deep equality has applicability beyond religious diversity, my work is largely focused on religious difference, which includes the rapidly growing category of 'nones'. This group has a wide range of approaches to religion, ranging from atheism, indifference, what might be called spiritual practices, and so on. The research question that is emerging as especially salient is how do those who have a religious commitment and those who don't live well together? It is in this project that I find resonance with and inspiration from the approach of Joe O'Connell and it is these commonalities that will be the focus of the remainder of this article.

## THE BLURRY NATURE OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Through everyday interactions, whether in O'Connell's work or that of others (*e.g.*, Gottschalk, 2005), identity is not the rigid construct that is often imagined when it comes to religion. Rather, identities are fluid, shifting and are contingent on context and life course, among other things. As O'Connell mentions, religion does not always present in rigid forms, and it is important to look for those places and events in which traditions are shared, improvised and engaged with: 'It may be noted that there were many Bengali poets bearing Muslim names who chose to compose and sing songs of the Krishna-Radha theme' (O'Connell, 2011: 60). Rather than denying the salience of the notion of religion as a field of study altogether, O'Connell maintained that it must be used with caution and with precision. He took up the daunting challenge of keeping the conceptual category of religion in tension with its lived manifestations which are often much less tidy than the categories constructed by scholars.

There are a number of related bodies of research that reinforce O'Connell's argument about the complexity of identity when it comes to religion and the

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Council of Canada funded Major Collaborative Research Initiative directed by Lori G. Beaman and housed at the University of Ottawa. It involves 37 team members at 24 universities in 5 countries, and offers an innovative space for international research comparisons on religious diversity as it is 'managed' in global context.

 [2] As I have articulated elsewhere, 'Rather than residing in law, grand pronouncements about political systems, formalized mediation, "interfaith" awareness or elaborate conceptual frameworks, deep equality exists in the everyday world on a persistent and consistent basis [...] the project of considering deep equality is a project of exploring the taken for granted ways in which social life works. Rather than focusing on stories of conflict, it is in the stories of resolution, navigation and negotiation of difference that I locate the idea of deep equality' (Beaman, 2014: 94–95).

fluidity of its practice. For example, the research of Robert Orsi (Orsi, 2005) in his study of American Catholics pays close attention to the day to day practices of Catholics outside of institutional teachings and doctrine. Similarly, Meredith McGuire examined the ways in which people construct their spiritual identities as a fluid process. They have argued that religion must be understood as 'lived' religion, rather than institutional religion. Of course, this insight is more profound in the American context, with its decades of academic focus on institutional religion as the only locus worth studying. That people are more flexible in their religious practices is old news to scholars such as Joseph T. O'Connell who have worked in the Indian context. Nonetheless, the cautionary approach to religious identity is a valuable lesson to scholars and one that bears repeating.

Two challenges emerge from O'Connell's approach: first, how to adequately recognise religion as an important component of people's lives, but as not necessarily the only salient identity marker; and second, how to reflect the variability of religious practice and identity in day to day life which often does not match up with analytical categories. To put this in context, though Orsi and McGuire have made important contributions to the recrafting of the study of religion, scholarship is still very often focused on the institutional and a more rigid conceptualisation of religious identity. Survey instruments that measure religious participation, for example, rarely stray outside of these boxes (church attendance and prayer frequency, for example) and thus remain incapable of capturing anything but the most superficial measures of religion. Multiplicity of identities remains almost inconceivable, as are practices that are not easily characterised.

This issue was taken up by Meredith McGuire (2008) in her discussion of Robert Bellah *et al.*'s *Habits of the heart* (Bellah *et al.*, 2007). McGuire challenges Bellah *et al.*'s conceptualisations of one of their study's interviewees, a nurse named Sheila, who comes to symbolise, through her 'individualistic' bricolage of spiritual practices, what Bellah *et al.* see as a negative turn in society. They essentially positioned individualism as eroding communities and see spiritual innovation of the type Sheila engages in (which does not involve a fixed religious community) as destructive. McGuire challenges this interpretation, arguing that 'Because Bellah's team focused their interviews on respondents' beliefs and commitments, expressed in response to very narrowly focused interview prompts, they did not learn much more about the nature of Sheila's religious experiences or her actual spiritual practices (if any)' (McGuire, 2008: 152). McGuire points to the particular way in which religion is framed and then pinpoints the impact of this on how religious identity must be framed. Ultimately there is little room for the sort of fluidity that exists in day to day life such as that identified by O'Connell, and which is a more

apt characterisation of how people construct their religious identities than the black and white categories of 'pure' religion.[3]

Within the Religion and Diversity Project our frustration with the limitations of social scientific measures of religious identity has led us to attempt to design a more nuanced survey which allows for a much broader range of religious identities, including those who are devoutly and exclusively religious, those who are selectively and flexibly religious, those whose cultural and religious identities are closely intertwined, and those who do not identify as religious at all but may have a strong cultural identity. We recognise that this attempt has its limitations, but it is a beginning effort to address some of the shortcomings of conceptualisation identified by O'Connell. To be sure, he was focusing on the Indian context, but the lessons from his work have resonance outside of that context too.

The related problem of overemphasis on religious identity is equally challenging. As researchers who are interested in religion we want to ask people about their religious beliefs, practices and identities. But the very act of inquiring draws out one specific aspect of their identities in an artificial manner. An example comes from the 'Religion in the Everyday' project with Muslims in Newfoundland.[4] At the end of the interview we asked participants to think about the ways that the government or state could respond to their needs. Although we kept the question rather open ended, the entire interview was structured around what we conceptualised as 'Muslim identity'. So, from that question we expected to hear about more flexible regulations in relation to halal food, or more widespread acceptance of holidays and support for their celebration. Few people responded this way, and one of our participants, Siddra, spoke passionately about the need for a library in her neighbourhood, remarking that when the local member of the legislature did his neighbourhood rounds during election time she had spoken to him about this: 'Because I want my children to walk to the library. If they can walk to McDonalds they can walk to the library'. In our focus on religion we had been too quick to assume that it would be religious concerns rather than other points of concern that our

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[3] Other thinkers have also puzzled over the dilemma of religion as a rather rigid concept. See Smith, 1962; Asad, 1993; and also Hick, 1985 for a discussion of how theology and religious identity impact approaches to pluralism.

[4] The project entitled 'Religion in the Everyday: Negotiating Islam in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador', with Principal Investigator Jennifer Selby, included 49 face-to-face interviews with 54 Muslims in St. John's and showed how Muslims negotiate their religious identities through stories which illustrated kindness, respect and attention to similarity. Our participants represented a range of ages, life stages and degrees of religious practice, ranging from barely cultural Muslims to orthodox Muslims. Amélie Barras, a postdoctoral fellow with the Religion and Diversity Project, conducted parallel interviews in Montreal amongst Muslims and also heard stories of the working out of difference.

participants shared with their neighbours or co-workers that would be most pressing to them. In sum, religious identities are rarely all that there is, and even those whose boundaries are more rigid are lived in sometimes surprising ways with a fluidity that is important to recognise. When there are important differences, which are always context-specific, they must be addressed.

## NAVIGATING DIFFERENCE

Joseph T. O'Connell recognised the dialectical nature of individual practices and structural facilitators and thus sought to uncover forces and models of socio-cultural integrative potential. Teachings, policies and laws can create space within which individuals and groups can act in particular ways, including those that facilitate a sense of belonging and recognition. But, there is ample evidence to suggest that absent a commitment by individuals and groups, these sorts of imperatives have little impact. It was for this reason that O'Connell emphasised local practices and interactions, including artistic expression and formal narrative presentations.

Here again, we see the innovative nature of O'Connell's work as he drew from stories to understand how people were able to overcome or temper seemingly clear boundaries between groups to live together in a more respectful and caring way. He notes:

> But even for the more casual Chaitanya Vaishnava and indeed the general populace of pre-colonial Bengal, the songs, dramatizations and visual artistic expressions of these *madhurya*-saturated themes must have had some degree of impact in refining their aesthetic-emotional sensibilities and making less harsh their inter-personal relationships (O'Connell, 2011: 60).

As O'Connell argues, songs, dramatizations and other artistic expressions which created an alternative framework or narrative surely had an influence on how people imaged both how others should be treated and how themselves would like to be treated.

There are many examples of conflict that are attributed to religious sources, but there is much less attention to examples of the positive negotiation of difference in everyday life and the forces of socio-cultural integrative potential, to use O'Connell's words. Of course religion does have a role in violence and hatred, but to emphasise this aspect to the exclusion of others is to miss a wealth of resources (Bouma, 2011; Adams, 2012). The challenge is to create another narrative that can act to frame everyday actions and which expresses values that facilitate positive encounters. This was the point of O'Connell's focus on the *bhakti* movement — to seek out those teachings, practices and approaches

that facilitate positive interactions between people who might not otherwise encounter each other, or who might encounter each other less positively.

Participating in mixed activities is also a core component of this blurring, and the development of common space, both geographically and mentally. Interestingly, in their research with school children in their eight country study of religion and education, the REDCo research group, headed by Wolfram Weiss, found that when students were asked how people of diverse religions could learn to get along they responded 'by doing things together' (Jackson, 2012). This response is supported by data from research in the field of social psychology (Allport, 1954; Hodson & Hewstone, 2013; Crisp & Turner, 2013). As O'Connell noted, this 'doing things together' fostered a sense of 'congenial interaction' (O'Connell, 2011: 53). In addition, it also builds a sense of similarity, rather than difference. Such similarity opens space for identities that are less rigid. Importantly too, religion often recedes into the background as people find common ground in other commonalities and identities as parents, children, students, neighbours, and so on. To be sure, similarity does not erase difference based on religious identity, but enables a different kind of interaction than does an assumption of difference or sameness. It creates an atmosphere in which other identities can also have voice and be enacted, creating bonds and appreciation for other modes of being, and, what American political theorist William Connolly describes as 'agonistic respect' (Connolly, 2005).

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider this notion of agonistic respect, as it is a recurring theme in stories from everyday life, including those I have examined in my own research. Specifically, Connolly describes agonistic respect and its operation in this way:

> An ethos of agonistic respect grows out of mutual appreciation for the ubiquity of faith and the inability of contending parties, to date, to demonstrate the truth of one faith over live candidates. It grows out of reciprocal appreciation for the element of contestability in these domains. The relation is agonistic in two senses: you absorb the agony of having elements of your own faith called into question by others, and you fold agonistic contestation of others into the respect that you convey toward them (Connolly, 2005: 124).

Joseph T. O'Connell also adopted this ethical practice as a way to approach what he studied. And, he also looked for this practice, and the enablers of it, in others, specifically in those with whom he conducted his research. In this way, he could identify points of common ground and positive interaction.

My research on deep equality is an attempt to move past the prevalent discourse of tolerance and accommodation which is framing 'solutions' to the 'problem' of diversity. Initially, I attempted to theorise this notion of 'deep equality' in the abstract. I eventually realised that only through a careful

examination of everyday experiences and practices, or, the things that people do and say to simply get along, would any understanding of the negotiation or navigation of diversity be possible. Drawing from a number of sources, including Les Back's work (Back, 2007) on what he calls 'the art of listening', I returned to data I had collected over the course of a number of projects, including submissions to public commissions on diversity management,[5] a project focused on immigrant youth and young adults,[6] and research with Muslims in Newfoundland and Montreal.[7] I also drew on film and novels that illuminated the persistence and the fragility of deep equality. Values such as respect, neighbourliness, caring and protectiveness emerged as key components of deep equality, which is a quest to identify forces of socio-cultural integration in everyday life.

Following in the tradition of O'Connell, deep equality emphasises the need to frame understandings of diversity on a continuum between sameness and difference, with similarity as the in-between space, which is also the most desirable and productive space in terms of living well together. For example, in the stories I have examined, parents living in a shared neighbourhood work to consider the diverse needs of the children who live and play together there, marking religiously observed dietary needs. Thus, religious identities are observed, but not prioritised, as everyone works to facilitate a sense of belonging. One woman reported, for example, her son's pre-dinner enquiry about whether the meal she was serving had pork in it. He did this in a subtle way, without calling attention to his observant friend or making a fuss.

> The other day my son and his friends were playing at home, and when mealtime was close, my son and one of his friends asked us if there was pork in the dinner, because the third friend could not eat pork. I found it very generous from 15 year old boys to take care of the dietary considerations of their friend, not leaving him with the embarrassment of asking if there was pork in the food, but taking it on themselves to secure the appropriate menu for him. They behaved not as if it was the kid's own issue, but as if his well being was something they were all concerned about (Personal communication with Marie-Claude).

This same woman had commented that some of the Muslims in her neighbourhood ate pork, and some did not, but she understood that religion is very

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[5] Led by Principal Investigator Solange Lefebvre, this project entitled 'La sécularisation, la laïcité et les identités religieuses dans le context québécois' discovered stories of deep equality within the submissions to Bouchard-Taylor Commission.

[6] Led by Principal Investigator Peter Beyer under the projects entitled 'Religion Among Immigrant Youth in Canada' and 'Religion Among Immigrant Young Adults in Canada', interviews with Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist youth revealed positive narratives that overshadowed isolated incidents of discrimination.

[7] This is the aforementioned 'Religion in the Everyday Project'.

much a lived phenomenon with varying practices. Being aware of the range of possibilities when it comes to religious identities, and being open to responding to all of them is part of what O'Connell imagined as constituting 'congenial interaction' amongst those who have differing identities, not only religious, but in socio-economic status and political affiliations and interests. Seeking these points of positive interaction is not simply a feel good exercise: if studied systematically, they can offer insight into how living with diversity can be facilitated to enhance human potential. Indeed, not only human, but a more caring relationship between human and non-human animals may be possible with such insights. How, though, to tell these stories in a more systematic way? Or, how can subjective personal values and behaviours be mobilised to effect 'congenial interaction'? This was, I believe, also O'Connell's project.

Practices of deep equality are replicated through attention to the stories people tell. Thus, the focus must be directed to the interaction between people, as well as the relationship between such interactions and law, policy and teachings. In contemporary discussions of pluralism and diversity very often it is law that is imagined as being the vehicle by which integration is achieved and difference overcome. My research shows that it is in fact everyday interactions that incorporate caring, neighbourliness, agonistic respect and even love that are the most profound forces of socio-cultural integration.

CONCLUSION

These lessons from Joseph T. O'Connell's work — to pay attention to the variability of identity and to seek out models for living well together — are important reminders of the salience of everyday life. However, his work can be situated in a broader stream of research that seeks to extrapolate from the immense potential of human creativity. As we face the reality of a complex and diverse global society, there are many scholars who are devoting themselves to critical engagement and analysis by detailing the contours of problems, challenges and conflict. This is worthwhile work and not to be dismissed. But at the moment it seems that the balance is tipped in favour of those who analyse the negative aspects of social life and what is sometimes described as the human condition, rather than those who are thinking about cooperation, collaboration and commonality.

Such scholarship does exist though and across a range of disciplines, including socio-biologists who look for the existence of cooperation as a companion narrative to competition (Nowak & Highfield, 2011); the creation of alternative economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006); positive psychology (Hanson, 2013); and alternative strategies in management (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2007), to name a few. Some, like Anna Tsing (Tsing, 2012), create new circuits of

understanding through unlikely foci, as in her work on the matsutake mush-room. Within the specific area of religion, scholars like Peter Gottschalk (Gottschalk, 2005) have sought to force a rethinking of rigid identities like 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', noting the shared participation in social life generally and in what might be considered to be religious rituals. Joseph T. O'Connell made a significant contribution to a deeper understanding of how people find strategies for getting along in everyday life. In an era in which diversity is often imagined as a problem, such scholarship offers a vital alternative narrative.

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