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# Dealing with Religious, Cultural, and Spiritual Pluralism in Adult and Higher Education Practice in an Age of Terrorism: Challenges and Controversies

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# Dealing with Religious, Cultural, and Spiritual Pluralism in Adult and Higher Education Practice in an Age of Terrorism: Challenges and Controversies

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**Abstract:** This symposium addresses the challenges, controversies, and perceived responsibilities in dealing with religious, cultural, and spiritual pluralism in adult education practice from the perspective of a multiple presenters of different positionalities and spiritual traditions.

## Introduction (Elizabeth J. Tisdell)

All of North America, indeed all the world stopped on September 11, 2001 to stare at their television sets and to see, either live or as replayed over and over again, an airplane-made-bomb crash into the South Tower of the World Trade Center in New York next to an already smoldering North Tower. Our shock and disbelief deepened when a few minutes later we learned of similar attacks on the Pentagon, and another aborted attempt that ended in a crash in Pennsylvania. As the death toll climbed, and in the aftermath of these terrorist attacks, we saw the media use terms such as “Muslim terrorists” which seems to erroneously equate terrorism with Islam. We have heard many blame the attacks on the entire Arab world; others blame Israel and Jews everywhere because of their seeming unwillingness to yield on the Palestinian issue. There have been backlash hate crimes, where people have been attacked and killed for looking “different” and/or for having non-Christian spiritual or religious beliefs. Further, we have also seen many in North America and across the world turn to religion and spirituality in an effort to cope with the incredible loss of life, and with their concern for the kind of world we are creating for ourselves and our children. While some turn to spirituality and/or religious community for sustenance and strength in these tragic and difficult times, for others the world situation provokes a crisis of faith and a turn away from religion or spirituality as contributing to the world’s ills around oppression and privilege. Indeed there are many responses to such a world crisis. There has been much discussion in the field of adult education about dealing with issues of race, class, gender, and culture, sexual orientation, and teaching for social change. Yet, there has been little discussion of the role of religion and spirituality as they intersect with these issues. In light of the world situation, it is becoming more and more difficult to ignore how religion and spirituality intersect with these issues and what it means in a very religious and culturally pluralistic society. *Thus, in order to begin to address these issues the purpose of this symposium is to explore the dilemmas, challenges, and controversies and perceived responsibilities in dealing with religious, cultural, and spiritual pluralism in adult education practice from the perspective of a multiple group of presenters of different race, gender, sexual orientation, and religious and spiritual traditions.*

### **Ian Baptiste: Education and the Practice of Spirituality**

In this paper I discuss what “being spiritual” means to me and how my understanding shapes my educational behavior. I am a bundle of biological and social desires. However, I am not satisfied with merely fulfilling them: I believe and hope I am more than my biological drives and social affiliations. I long for (and believe I deserve) what existentialists call existential recognition—the belief that my presence in the universe counts; that my presence in the universe is worthwhile—not just because of my social affiliations or accomplishments, but because “I am.” This belief in existential recognition allows me to treat my existence holistically rather than merely a series of fragmented coincidence. It makes congruous what would otherwise be happenstance. I believe that existential recognition is a desire and “birthright” not only of myself, but of all other entities (humans, other animals, plants, etc.) in the universe. In short, I believe (and hope) that the reasons for our existence are NOT socially determined; that the universe (and every thing in it) is imbued with immanent purpose(s); that existence is explained teleologically, not socially. *Spirituality* is the term I use to capture this phenomenon—this transcendental, teleological, existential recognition. But from whence cometh my belief in the spiritual? What is the source of my teleological doctrine?

Growing up in a strong charismatic, Protestant tradition, I once believed that the immanent purposes (alluded to above) were outlined in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. And I understood the scriptures to be the literal, inerrant word of GOD. As such, I assumed that these immanent purposes were universal and absolute. In fact I equated the two terms—if a thing was universal, it was (ipso facto) absolute, and vice versa. Having come to embrace a social constructive view of knowledge (and knowing), I have now severed the two. For me the term *absolute* means “free of imperfection”, “perfect” *Universal* on the other hand, means “pertaining to or including all members making up that universe,” “present or occurring everywhere.” Universality answers to the question: To whom does this particular principle or purpose apply? For the universalist the answer is “everyone.” Absolutism addresses a very different question, namely: How certain am I of the rightness of this principle or purpose? To the absolutist, the answer is 100%. An absolutist has no sliver of doubt regarding her immanent purposes.

As a vestige of my Judeo-Christian upbringing, I still believe in universals—that is to say, I believe in (and attempt to order my life according to) principles and purposes that could be applied everywhere. For instance, I believe that taking the life of another human being is justified if: a) the perpetrator is not acting in self-defense; b) the perpetrator is not attempting to defend the life of innocent others; c) the perpetrator’s actions credibly threatens the life of others, and d) there are no other ways to effectively restrain the perpetrator. As a universalist, I will attempt to apply this principle across the board—to every person, everywhere. However, because I am not an absolutist, I do not hold this principle with 100% certitude. As a social constructivist, I hold out the possibility that I may be wrong. In other words, I have reservations regarding the rightness of my position. For one thing, I am not 100% certain as to the definition of “life.” Nor am I 100% certain as to the definition of “human being,” “credible threat” or “innocence.” These uncertainties give me reason to doubt my principle, and keeps me open to alternatives.

For me, then, being spiritual means believing (and attempting to act in accordance with the belief) that existential recognition is a desire and birthright of every human being. To avoid capriciousness, and as a hold over from my Judeo-Christian upbringing, I continue to search for universal principles to guide (and assess) my responsibilities to my self and others. I assume that all human being try to operate (tacitly or overtly) under some minimal set of universal principles. Further, I assume that the universal principles by which people live and work are not always compatible; that sometimes individuals and groups hold irreconcilable principles. I believe that to operate under a principle is to privilege some value(s) over other value(s). For me then, the practice of spirituality is always a persuasive (i.e., coercive) enterprise, because, to practice my spirituality is to wittingly or unwittingly impose my universal values upon others—no matter how nicely and respectfully I impose them. Education, I believe, is one institution in which universal values are (inexorably) imposed. As such, as an educator my ethical question is not whether I impose

universal values, but rather what universal values I impose and how I impose them. Religion is the name I give to institutions whose *raison d'être* is the propagation of particular sets of universal values.

### **Derise Tolliver: The Challenge and the Gift of Chaos**

As an adult educator and clinical psychologist, I have long been committed to a professional practice that addresses issues of oppression and social justice, in support of the empowerment of those with whom I work. I share this personal and social transformation agenda with many of my adult educator colleagues. In large part, this agenda, for me, originates out of my lived experiences as a woman of African descent, a member of groups whose perspectives have often been minimized in academic and political discourses. Grounded in a Spiritness (Nobles, 2002) that is informed by the wisdom of spiritual and philosophical traditions of my family ancestors and the peoples of West Africa, I respect and have been inspired by the messages of other spiritual traditions that also speak of truth, peace, justice, love, community, connection to the Creator and to all that has been created. I have also learned from many social and political activists, whose work is often grounded within their own sense of the importance of spirituality when dealing with issues of living in this world. It is within this context that I comment on issues of spirituality, cultural and religious pluralism post 9/11.

As people continue to mourn, and attempt to recover from the intense fear, feelings of insecurity, destabilization, and immobilization that followed 9/11, many have been propelled into seeking comfort and connection with others through embracing their own particular spiritualities. We've seen learners moved to reach out to others who are culturally, spiritually, or religiously different, to learn more about diversity, and to ask what they can do to change the world. This is a growing energy that can be harnessed for social action. At the same time that we hear claims of national unity and compassion, there have been reports of backlash against those who are perceived to look like "terrorists," or whose perspectives challenge an unquestioned nationalism that engages in the dualistic thinking of "with us or against us," "our way or no way." It is the case that now, some voices are being tolerated less and penalized more than before. With this, there is the danger of differences and different perspectives being less often represented in various discourses, in spite of representation being a hallmark value of higher education, as well as this nation. So, an educational agenda that addresses issues of exclusion, inequities, and emphasizes personal and social transformation continues to be relevant. The tragedy of 9/11 has not changed that. If anything, it has been a reminder of the importance of diversity and meaningful inclusion, not only to higher education, but also, more generally, in the world.

We were angry, fearful, and distressed by the terrorism that occurred in September, 2001, and calls for justice were justified. However, although seeking justice is an important response, and one that is prescribed by most, if not all, spiritual traditions, justice that is based on revenge and retaliation is not constructive. We cannot be simplistically or blindly nationalistic in these times of uncertainty. As learners try to understand the larger meaning of these recent world events, we as adult educators and learners ourselves, are charged to engage in the principles of our profession - reasoned inquiry, consideration of multiple perspectives, dialogue and discussion (AACU, 2001). More than that, I suggest that we must hold a mirror to ourselves as we contemplate the changing world. That mirror would show that terrorism is not a new thing in this country. Many people have lived with terrorism prior to 9/11. This reality is manifested in a national history that includes lynchings, the bombing of Black Wall Street in Tulsa in 1921, Cointelpro, genocidal actions against Native Americans, chattel slavery, racial and ethnic profiling, racial and sexual violence and discrimination. Racism and oppression have terrorized many into silence and helplessness. Perhaps worst of all, domestic terrorism has often eliminated a person's belief in their unlimited possibilities (Nobles, 2002). And the loss of that potential affects not only the silenced, but all of us who lose the gift of their contributions.

My Spiritness tells me that part of my mission is to help people, including myself, remember and lay claim to those unlimited possibilities and, in that process of recalling, to support our re-remembering into wholeness, both at the individual and larger community level. What this means for me as an adult educator

is that my work must create space for inclusion and active involvement for all learners, including those who heretofore may have experienced disregard for or exclusion of their realities. This sets the stage for critical thinking and reasoned inquiry, both of which cannot optimally occur when important voices are systematically or unconsciously excluded or dismissed. I must invite passion into the learning space, with my own passion and authenticity as models, while being compassionate when what is said is not necessarily what I personally embrace. I must be humble and respectful of the humanness of my students, and their realities. At the same time, I must have the courage to challenge viewpoints and to ask of myself and others some difficult and sometimes, uncomfortable questions: How can power be brought together with conscience? How do we speak truth to power? Where is terrorism in our lives, perpetrated upon or supported by us? What tools or skills do we have to dismantle such terrorism? How do we maintain a loving vision in the face of crisis? These times challenge us even more to stand by our values and to be patriots in the truest sense of the word - supporting the critical affirmation of the country at its best (Dyson, 2002). As important as it is to address national security concerns as a result of the events of 9/11, our actions cannot be at the expense of dishonoring the realities and rights of those who have experienced terrorism prior and subsequent to 9/11. All of these issues must be part of the conversations in our classrooms.

Cultural, spiritual, and religious pluralism are realities of our world. If consideration of these realities in our practice is a controversial notion, then we, as adult educators, are obliged to be controversial. Oppression, exclusion and injustice are also realities of our world, still, in the wake of 9/11. If addressing these issues and pressing for truth is labeled subversive, then the responsibility to address these ills requires us to be transgressors in the service of the "practice of freedom (hooks, 1994)." For many people, the events of 9/11 have been experienced as chaos. Yet, Septima Clark, educator and social activist, said that "...Chaos is a gift"(cited in Quinn, 2001). It is incumbent upon us to use this gift to move ourselves forward to redefine who we are in the world. In the wake of it all, I hope that we, in the field of adult education, can be the "highest level of spirit...to be a force for good" (Coltrane, quoted by Dyson, 2002), working courageously in the light of truth, however risky.

### **Bob Hill: Contesting Rights in the New World (Dis)Order: Spiritual Vignettes in a Queer Voice**

Terrorism can be defined as politically, socially or culturally inspired violence for purposes of intimidation or coercion to force the furtherance of alternative political or social objectives—something that is a part of the lifeworld of many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people. In an age when "terrorism" has assumed new meaning, those situating anti-gay violence as terroristic have new possibilities for exploring spiritual learning and knowledge construction, especially since the September 11 attacks in NY and Washington.

#### *Whose Experiences Count?*

Heroes are a window through which we see who we are, who we can become. There was no mention in mainstream media of queer heroes or that hundreds of LGBTQ people died on 9-11; yet, discussions about opposite-sex spouses, partners, children, and families flourished. The message: LGBTQ people cannot be patriots or heroes. Some popular religious leaders on the Right even called the attacks, God's punishment for a gay social agenda. Such anti-gay rhetoric was termed "spiritual terrorism" more than three years ago. Mackeracher (1996) claims that spirituality grows from our sense of self, to describe spiritual learning. Silence and accusations rob LGBTQ people of the potential for spiritual self-discovery, self-expression, and self-fulfillment.

#### *Contesting Notions/Enabling Practices*

Various popular mainstream cultural products constructed after 9-11 offer LGBTQ communities an opportunity to re/inforce or re/invent identities. The uses and interpretations of products (e.g. patriotism,

unity, the flag, and slogans like “God Bless America”) have been reinscribed with alternative meanings of self-love in ways that both support and resist the dominant narrative. Gay liberation theology shows that only by taking our own lives seriously can we then be lovers of the world. Further, since 9-11, public policies around the social construction of “spouse” and “family” have been reexamined. The deaths of lesbians and gay men put fresh pressure on U.S. social policy around definitions of these terms—words that LGBTQ people have long battled to redefine. Post 9-11 illustrates something members of LGBTQ communities know: same-sex couples have been robbed of rights as legitimate families. The result has been to refine public policy since survivor benefits have now been given to same sex partners of victims of 9-11, a practice that troubles the traditional religious meanings of family and spouse.

### *On Re/presentation and the Untruth of “United We Stand.”*

Hetero-hegemony is a constant process of unequal struggle between asymmetrical social forces. The events around 9-11 have provided an opportunity for queer self-embodiment in diverse ways—demonstrating that identities are complex and unruly. The result shows that experience does not speak for itself. Its meanings are a performance of faith, hope, rage, and love. Othered as deviant, criminal or sinner, LGBTQ folks have an opportunity to re/negotiate these constructions to “show *our* true colors.” While the discourse of a unified nation serves the interests of the dominating culture’s political agenda, we know that *unity* has come to mean *uniformity*. Uniformity erases difference and silences LGBTQ voices struggling for social justice. Those who live in social uniformity are likely to remain in Fowler’s stage of faith development “characterized by conformity, where one finds one’s identity by aligning oneself with a certain perspective . . . with little opportunity to reflect on it critically.” E.g., the gayness of Franciscan Fr. Judge, the fallen gay chaplain of the NY Fire Department was subsumed in the discourse of uniformity/conformity.

### *Queer Life in an Age of Terrorism*

In the current political climate, efforts to pass laws on hate crimes and employment non-discrimination for LGBTQ folks—scheduled for national legislative action before 9-11—have been diverted. Ironically, the LGBTQ political agenda is now peripheral to narrowly defined efforts in defense of the traditional family, freedom and democracy. Too, in an effort to build an international coalition against terrorism, the U.S. has relaxed pressure on countries that mistreat LGBTQ people. The U.S. has remained silent as 52 gay Egyptians were arrested by a government that is appeasing its religious Right who oppose Egypt’s participation in “the war”—making its own gay population sacrificial lambs. Many of the men have been charged with “contempt for religion.” And, Al-Fatiha, the first organization for gay Muslims, has shifted its mission since 9-11 from helping LGBTQ Muslims in their quest for a gay Islamic spirituality to educating the broader gay community about Islam, and the historical and political context of the attacks.

### *Significance for Adult Education*

A primary goal of adult education should be to craft a just world in which to live. As educators, we are sometimes called to assist adults in meaning-making under conditions that are oppositional to dominant ideologies. Prior to the recent focus on terrorism, discourses of *difference* were causing society to experience discontinuities and disruptions in prevailing notions of social cohesion. The jingoism of post 9-11 strains to reassert the hegemony of a privileged group that has narrowly defined “American” and that has parochial notions of spirituality. Currently there are strong forces attempting to build a Right-wing agenda wrapped in the flag and Church. Adult educators dedicated to building an equitable world will want to teach against discourses that resort to religion, patriotism and unity as a means to further heterosexist social and political objectives. Freire (1972, p. 37) noted that those committed to justice must re-examine themselves constantly within the spirituality of conversion, and be “reborn,” taking on a new form of existence. As a result of recent happenings, we who are oriented toward social transformation

must add one more tool to our anti-oppression work kit: adult education for anti-terrorism in diverse spiritual and religious contexts.

### **Nadira K. Charaniya: Challenging the Majority Consciousness**

For those of us who are representative of non-Christian (or non-religious) groups, America's separation of church and state is a welcome ideology. This separation, **theoretically**, frees us from the imposition of dogma, beliefs, and practices that are representative of any one majority voice, and provides us with the opportunity to achieve success in society based on merit rather than on religious identification. As such, the introduction of religion into the sphere of education - at any level - would appear to be an unwelcome and potentially scary prospect.

At the same time, the reality of our world today is that despite the rhetoric of diversity, pluralism, and separation of church and state, there is often a belligerent, intolerant, and parochial attitude toward those who hold beliefs that are different. A clear example of the rhetoric that embodies this narrow-mindedness is the opening prayer made by Pastor Joe Wright for the January 23, 1996 session of the Kansas House of Representatives in which he explicitly said: "...we have ridiculed the absolute truth of Your Word and called it "pluralism" and "...we have worshiped other Gods and called it multiculturalism". Other examples can be found in the recent remarks of our nation's leaders. As the Chicago Tribune tells us "...the rhetoric has taken on an unmistakable religious tone in recent weeks as leading figures inside and outside government have invoked God, decried "evil" and quoted the Bible. This tone is accentuated by the strong religious convictions of Bush and Ashcroft, and it echoes an American moralism that historians say has cropped up repeatedly in times of crisis." (Bendavid, 2002).

There is no doubt that if we are to move ahead as a society, the issues related to religious, cultural, and spiritual pluralism in adult and higher education practice must be dealt with. One's actions in the world, after all, are both consciously and unconsciously based on one's own, often unexamined, notions of the world, which are influenced by one's religious belief (or lack of it). Just as we have begun to deal with issues of race, class, and gender in the field of adult education, so too must we begin to consider these issues.

More particularly of concern to me – as a Muslim, Indo-African, British, Canadian, American woman – we need to deal with these issues in such a way as to create awareness of difference without simultaneously opening up the floodgates of religious ideology to even further unwelcome intrusion into our lives. We need to deal with these issues so that we are not simply helping people to *assimilate* more successfully, as is the case in the 'teaching the culturally different' approach to multiculturalism. We need to deal with them on the basis of enabling people to have voice without that voice drowning out the voices of others. As Eck tells us inclusivism, or additive multiculturalism, is "a 'majority consciousness,' not necessarily in terms of numbers, but in terms of power. And the consciousness of the majority is typically 'unconscious' because it is not tested and challenged by dialogue with dissenting voices" (1993, p.185). In the spirit of the history of our field, we need to challenge this majority consciousness by introducing voices of those who hold views different from the Christian majority.

If we consider Clark's (1989) suggestion that the worldviews people hold today are being more and more framed by political leaders, commercial media, and the schools, then it is a scary thought to contemplate that politicians and the media continue to exercise the unexamined dominant ideology of a single religious group while schools continue to evade the issue. If we do not begin, as a field and as a society, to deal with, confront, and attempt to understand our religious difference, we are in danger of letting these same politicians, who today seem to be more and more conservative and dogmatic dictate how we understand and relate to each other. More importantly, we render ourselves powerless when we let the government and the media dictate to us what we should believe and understand about those that are different from us. As Clark informs us, higher education "manages to sidestep direct examination of the beliefs and assumptions on which the American worldview is based, and avoids any serious consideration of where America and the world as a whole are headed" (1989, p.239). Today, in this age of "terrorism,"



it is more important than ever that Americans are able to critically consider what is happening in the world. If we as adult educators, placed as many of us are in an emancipatory framework, do not begin to work on helping people examine their assumptions related to religious, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of life, we are failing those that we seek to serve.

### **Jane West Walsh: “Swimming Together”**

As adult educators we are cultural workers (Friere, 1972), engaged in research and practice for the purpose of fostering democracy. We do so from within the particularities that define our positionality. I am a Jewish adult educator. Today, thousands of Jewish adults seek to learn and know more, teach others and ground their lives, in Jewish values, rituals and traditions. They see themselves as being on a journey that involves learning more about themselves as Jews (Cohen and Eisen, 2000.) Most of the adults on this journey are literate in the canon of Western thought and ideas, many with college degrees in various level and kind. But, ironically, these same adults are generally illiterate in their knowledge of Jewish texts, traditions and sources, language and ideas. Large numbers of American Jews lost their “cultural minds” (a phrase is attributed to Dr. Scipio A. J. Colin III who uses it to refer to the profound lack of cultural self-awareness that inhibits the ability of individuals to see how assumptions from the larger majority cultural milieu has an impact on what they think, how they live and what they do in their daily lives.)

There are no definitive answers as to why and how this has happened, however there are patterns and facts that seem relevant, patterns that are shared by other minority cultural groups in America First is a pull towards assimilation. Once there were strong religious and cultural norms that were shared by the small pockets of Jewish communities around the world, often living under systems of religious and cultural oppression. The first Jewish community in the Americas was formed in Recife, Brazil in 1654, who were seeking religious, economic and political freedom from the tentacles of the Spanish and Portuguese inquisition. Starting with this small group, American Jews who cared about retaining their cultural and religious traditions have struggled to balance the push towards acclimatization and social success with the pull towards assimilation into the predominantly Christian and secular milieu. Jews today are first, second, third, and fourth generation Americans with cultural roots in a variety of places around the world, such as Germany, Poland, Argentina, Israel, Lithuania, Africa, Russia. With this background, as a community we are one and we are many. Our common language is Hebrew, but this knowledge is forgotten as we take on the cultural norms of our new society. Jews share this struggle with other minority peoples who come to live in North America seeking a better life.

Second, the societal pressure to succeed in the larger American social and economic sphere quickly placed an emphasis on success in the common spaces we share as a society such as the public school, college and university and the marketplace. As an American definition of success emphasized the individual over the community, religious life suffered. Third, in the twentieth century, Jewish learning in America was male and child-centered. For many adults today, Jewish learning stopped in childhood. Women and girls traditionally were not given *entre’* to sites where serious Jewish learning took place, since it was considered primarily the domain of men. Today, Jewish women are seeking opportunities for Jewish learning in increasing numbers and, are changing the face of religious life in America. Many are now trying to reclaim their “cultural mind,” deepen their identity, and find their voice as Jewish Americans.

When adults, like these, choose to live within a cultural framework that is informed and directed by particular religious values and ideals, whether it be an inherited tradition one chooses to deepen as an adult, or a new one taken on out of commitment to a value system and tradition that is acquired, there is an effect upon one’s relationships and actions in the world. The rejection of a tradition has an impact, as well. Our field has struggled to inform itself about how racism, classism and gender bias inform our individual and communal worldviews. We strive to uncover the ideologies that inform the politics of societal and interpersonal power that reside in our practice. We engage in and foster critical reflection that leads us to insight about our assumptions and how they impact how we work, live and teach. While we acknowledge

that we still have a long way to go in all of those areas, as a field we seem to be afraid to talk about religion. As a doctoral student, I engaged in a study of adult learning in the context of interreligious dialogue with my colleague who is a Muslim educator, Nadira Charaniya (Walsh and Charaniya, 2001). We engaged in the study to a search for understanding of how the role of religion in its particularities impacts upon adult learners as they engage in the larger cultural milieu. Issues about religion had been heretofore missing from much of the adult education literature.

After September 11, we were all pushed into the interreligious dialogue pool (Charaniya and Walsh, 2001). While we are learning to swim, coming to terms with our own religious selves in relation to the news and the realities of religiously grounded terrorism, we have a window of opportunity to explore the dimension of adulthood that is informed by the inherited religious traditions we keep, the ones we reject, and those we choose to acquire for ourselves as adults, as we seek to become agents of democratic social change. As colleagues, we can choose to engage in dialogue about this phenomenon as professionals who care about one another and the future of humanity. We can choose to do this in the spirit of further exploration of the limits and boundaries of our field. To choose this path, it will require that we find the courage to teach ourselves, and others, from the heart, while uncovering some of our most basic assumptions about our selves, our colleagues and our students. To be productive, such a dialogue must be grounded in our shared commitment to democratic social action, not as religious ideologues committed to converting and advocating for our particular religious points of view. Rather, it requires us to engage in open and honest reflection about our own religious choices, how they impact on our lives, our research and our teaching practice, and, ultimately, on the lives of our colleagues and students as religiously diverse others. Let us all learn to swim, together.

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