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Better Together: An Exploration of Interfaith Ideologies

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Abstract: In a world full of polarizing agents that function to divide society, the binding nature of interfaith ideologies serves to develop meaningful relationships between individuals, groups, and communities that subscribe to various religious or secular belief systems. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation encapsulate one's ability to genuinely listen, share stories, and embrace growth and learning, not despite but because of differences. This article explores the influence of interfaith work on college campuses, within urban communities, and throughout the fields of medicine and global health. These are all specific aspects of a society that has the potential, now more than ever before, to promote wellness through interfaith ideologies and pursue a future in which humankind is better together.

Interfaith work is an inconspicuous but influential contributor to wellness on college campuses. These include such offerings as psychological counseling, recreational programming, and academic support services. As interfaith initiatives tend to reside in shared spaces of religion, social justice, politics, and service, few studies attempt to measure the impact of interfaith work alone on student well-being. Yet, there is a notable amount of research which indirectly assesses the wellness effects of interfaith work as it functions within the broader college experience.

One such study by Astin et al. found a net positive relationship between student faith related development and well-being.[1] The study, which compared five measures of religious and spiritual growth against various indicators of wellness, found that grade point average, leadership skills, psychological well-being, and overall satisfaction with college were found to increase alongside the development of equanimity (centeredness during hardship and overall sense of purpose). Likewise, the development of global citizenship (connectedness to others and a desire to address social injustices) increased not only the aforementioned wellness factors but also student commitment to interracial understanding and cross-cultural cooperation.[1] Thus, interfaith work, which seeks to develop appreciative knowledge of cultural and religious diversity, to facilitate reflection on questions of meaning, purpose and values, and to catalyze communal cooperation on shared issues, is an integral part of student growth and wellness.

Notably, this positive relationship between spiritual growth and wellness was observed to be fueled not by religious involvement alone but by experiences of diversity and self-reflection. Inner works, including meditation, journaling, and engagement with faculty were found to enhance leadership abilities alongside "traditional" catalysts of personal development such as intramurals and study abroad programs.[1] These findings validate the importance of organizations such as Butler University's Center for Faith and Vocation (CFV), which supports fifteen faith communities while also offering interfaith programs and multifaith services, spiritual care conversations with faculty and clergy, meditation classes, vocational reflection workshops, service opportunities, and educational events related to equity and inclusion. By helping students develop centeredness and an ethic of caring, organizations like the CFV play an indispensable role in campus wellness.

Beyond serving as a catalyst for inner growth, interfaith work can also contribute to wellness by creating a healthier campus climate. A study by Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach and Dr. Matthew Mayhew, of North Carolina State University and Ohio State University respectively, suggests that "structural worldview diversity, space for support and spiritual expression, and provocative experiences with worldview diversity" all contribute positively to student satisfaction with the campus psychological climate.[2] A study by Staples et al. found that these campus climate conditions can be achieved practically by incorporating pluralistic discussion in the classroom, designating multi-faith spaces on campus, fairly applying religious observance policies, and training faculty to support students in their unique meaning-making journeys.[3]

The centrality of interfaith work to these "best practices" is clear: by contributing to an inclusive campus climate in which diversity is experienced and expressed positively, interfaith work furthers student well-being and success.

Role of Interfaith Interactions in the Context of Urban Communities

The Center for Interfaith Cooperation (CIC) is an organization in Indianapolis that works to unite individuals from different faiths and backgrounds in the spirit of peace and community.[4] While faith in the word interfaith may nominally refer to faith as religion, interfaith in this context does not necessitate religious distinction. Rather, faith is understood in a broader sense as the practice of humans reaching out towards meaning and the divine, whatever that may entail. In fact, the practice of interfaith may be an expression of faith, insofar as one is reaching towards the meaning and divine found within diverse community involvement.

The CIC offers a variety of programs which range from interfaith digital dialogues where people of different faith traditions converse one-on-one, to wellness activities informed by a partnership with the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI). The most notable program, perhaps, is the annual Festival of Faiths, which brings together an incredibly diverse range of people to share beliefs and perspectives. Typically, this event is held outdoors in a vibrant physical community.[4] This year, due to COVID-19, the CIC presented a virtual festival where people discussed their traditions, culture, community, and faith in an interview format. The final product was a digital compilation of voices, perspectives, and faiths. It was shared with the public and will be accessible for years to come.

Interfaith involvement with the CIC cultivates a state which could be called communal grounding. Communal grounding can be understood as an individual's sense of developing a feeling of "at homeness" or situatedness within a community.[4] It occurs as the result of meaningful community engagement and manifests itself both psychologically and

spiritually as a state of simultaneous calmness and social invigoration. In other words, people feel comfortable insofar as they have a dignified seat at the communal table, but they also want to connect with others at this table. Because the theme of faith or interfaith is tremendously valuable to people, it is the ideal avenue for communal grounding. There is a sense of respect, vulnerability, and dignity when people come together and share what literally might be their ultimate concern in life.[5] Because the engagement has surpassed the bound of one's immediate and everyday environment, there is also a sense of expansiveness and worldliness that could not otherwise be felt.

Interfaith work within a broader urban setting can build branches of meaningful relationships with members of this community. One is more confident in reaching out to members of the larger community, but at the same time is more willing to invite these same community members into one's own immediate and everyday surroundings for cooperation. The relationships established at this level of society are vital for establishing interfaith ideologies on a wider, global stage.

Implications of Interfaith Work in Medicine and on Global Health

"I believe that the question of the twenty-first century will be shaped by the faith line...Religious Pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor a forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of each depends on the health of the whole."[6] These are the words of Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core, from his autobiography, *Acts of Faith*. Although his words present a general understanding of interfaith cooperation in a broad context, it is quite possible to use the resulting sentiments of wellness and health to draw literal connections between interfaith work and the fields of medicine and global health. However, before dissecting these connections in the context of the twenty-first century, it is helpful to briefly discuss the historical interactions between religion and medicine.

Throughout history, there has been an abundance of religious institutions establishing the very first infrastructures of medical facilities across the globe. Be it the Chinese Buddhists, Hindus in the Indian Subcontinent, Muslims in the Middle East, or other Abrahamic traditions in the west, groups from these religions founded hospitals, clinics, and other healthcare facilities dating back to the "first millennium of the Common Era".[7] Despite various means of providing medical care over time, these institutions and their facilities displayed "how God's love can be externalized...to meet the needs of the human beings."[7] Of course, more secular perspectives towards medicine would develop over time and the separation of religion and medicine would result, especially from the Renaissance period through the Enlightenment period.[7] However, at least in the United States, the pendulum has swung back to unite the two within the past couple of decades: the number of medical schools that incorporate topics of religion or spirituality have gone from less than 5 in 1990[8] to 115 in 2016.[9] This transformation has taken place due to a shift in the demographics of religiously diverse patients who yearn to be treated by physicians who are equipped not only with the knowledge of medicine, but also with tools for interfaith engagement.

Moreover, many hospitals in the United States employ chaplains or teams of chaplains from multiple faiths who need to be able to meet the patients they serve, as well as the hospital staff they work with, on their own terms of faith or secularism. The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab is a group of scholars, chaplaincy professionals, and educators, who have been exploring how interfaith training improves hospital chaplaincy.[10] They are currently piloting an additional project to explore benefits for wellness when interfaith chaplaincy leaders team up with mental health professionals in higher education contexts.[10] What happens in a

professional context when interfaith literacy, relationships, and care are built into the team and the model for accomplishing goals? As this question gets the research it may deserve, we can extrapolate that the professional teams our future healthcare professionals are going to find themselves on might benefit heavily by having interfaith awareness, appreciation of others, and an eye towards wellness across beliefs represented.

The significance of interfaith work to further provide wellness through a context of medicine extends beyond the United States and even beyond the practice of western medicine. To this day, there are communities and cultures in various pockets of the world that continue to practice forms of traditional medicine, as questions of "accessibility, affordability, and cultural compatibility" linger for the access of western medications and services in rural communities.[11] Particularly in Africa "the ratio of traditional healers to the population...is 1:500 compared to 1:40 000 medical doctors," and collaborations between these traditional and modern doctors to prevail over the current distrust and learn from each other's weakness and strengths play a significant role in the lives of millions of Africans. Hence, the impact of equipping future physicians with the tools of interfaith cooperation are further applicable in such a global health context. Moreover, as the influences and popularity of certain traditional medicine practices continue to grow in Europe, Asia, and America and the global market of phyto-therapeutic sales generates tens of billions of dollars, the ability of western medicine to recognize and respect these shifts is further rooted in a united, interfaith perspective to improve global health and wellness.[11]

As the coronavirus pandemic fuels an unprecedented global health crisis, the ripple effect of interfaith collaborations and dialogue to produce meaningful action, aimed at a collective sense of wellness, has been evident. One example is the Day of Prayer for Humanity on which Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Jains, Buddhists, Atheists, and Agnostics all presented a message of unity.[12] Another is the Global Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action Covid-19 Initiative, created through the partnership between UNICEF and Religions for Peace, that raises awareness this pandemic has on the world's youth.[12] Interfaith work has served to provide a sense of stability and hope during a chaotic time. As the pandemic rages on, the implications of such work will continue to positively impact the lives and livelihoods of millions around the world, and the collective ability to embrace Patel's message of religious pluralism and interfaith cooperation will indeed shape the narrative of the twenty-first century.[6]

Conclusion

Interfaith engagement has potential benefits for both the individual and community. Students find greater academic and personal success by the virtue of their spiritual practices and commitments to interfaith communities. In terms of community benefits, organizations such as the Center for Interfaith Cooperation functions as an interfaith hub to promote empathy, understanding, and religious literacy for the central Indiana region. Interfaith engagement creates stronger relationships and progress towards shared goals within the wider communities. Further, when the potential for an organized communal approach to interfaith relationships is focused on the medical field and global health, there are incredible impacts on wellness because of interfaith perspectives. These benefits of medicinal and research creativity, cultural sensitivity, and a global network permeate to benefit individuals in more dynamic ways, bind communities through more plural relationships, and influence global transformations in health and wellness that transcend particular boundaries. Interfaith engagement is a tool, and the potential benefits of that tool are powerful in a variety of sectors. Collective work across different backgrounds shapes outcomes for the better; in the case of the medical field and global health,

interfaith engagement promotes wellness at many levels and should be further developed.

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