

Pluralism Podcast

Episode 1 “Religion in the Workplace” Transcript

[Introductory Segment]

Summary: Your hosts, Rachel Foran and Usra Ghazi, introduce the first episode of the Pluralism Podcast, a production of [The Pluralism Project](#) at [Harvard University](#). This organization was founded by Harvard Professor [Diana Eck](#) over two decades ago to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources. [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#) (or OCG, which you can access at pluralism.org) is one such resource. OCG includes essays, interactive maps, and links to historical documents and current news articles.

This show, in three vignettes, presents a snapshot of the research and information you will find in [On Common Ground](#). These vignettes highlight America’s rich religious diversity, her changing religious landscape, and particular moments of encounter in the public sphere.

Today’s episode focuses on religious encounters in the workplace.

Rachel: Hi everyone, I’m Rachel Foran (and I’m Usra Ghazi) and you are listening to the first episode of the Pluralism Podcast, a production of [The Pluralism Project](#) at [Harvard University](#). This organization was founded by Harvard Professor [Diana Eck](#) over two decades ago to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources. [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#) (or OCG, which you can access at pluralism.org) is one such resource. OCG includes essays, interactive maps, and links to historical documents and current news articles.

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Usra: The encounters in today’s episode take place in the workplace. You know, Rachel, this show has got me thinking about the many ways that Muslims navigate religious practice in the workplace. Many of the places I worked after college happened to be faith-based nonprofit organizations so the Muslim publishing company where I worked in Skokie, Illinois actually had a little mosque right behind the reception area and every afternoon our IT manager would give the call to prayer. We’d leave our cubicles to pray shoulder to shoulder and then head back to work. On Fridays we would carpool to the local mosque for Jummah prayer. I also worked at an interfaith organization that repurposed one of its meeting rooms to be a prayer room where I’d

often take breaks for my midday and afternoon prayers. As our staff grew, it was converted to an “interfaith room” to be more welcoming to employees from non-religious backgrounds or secular meditation practices.

I was especially grateful to be working at these organizations because I have had some contrasting experiences, which I’m sure many of our listeners could relate to. For instance, I used to work at a Marshalls retail store where there was only one small break room where management kept the television running so I would often retreat to the fitting rooms to make my prayers in bows and prostrations and hope that onlookers didn’t think I was a peeping tom.

I actually grew up listening to a song by a prominent Canadian Muslim singer, [Dawud Wharnsby Ali](#), who encouraged Muslims to consider all the earth as a place of prayer. I won’t sing it, but it goes like this:

All the earth is a place of prostration
Every field and meadow, mountain, park, city, farm plantation.
Every roadside, seaside, hillside, walkway,
Any place clean and green can be a place to pray

And he sings about praying in fitting rooms, in the aisle of airplanes, on the side of a road, you get the idea. So for me as a Muslim, finding a space to pray is of the utmost important, which is the case for people of many religions who observe religious practices regarding food or dress. What do you do if you’re a practicing Muslim, or for that matter a Hindu or Sikh employee at a department store, in a hospital, or the military?

Rachel: This program will shed some light on some of these questions. Our first vignette looks at the Sikh religious practice of wearing the turban, the dahstar. We will hear more about this practice later in the program when we speak with [Dr. Harpreet Singh](#), Professor of South Asian Studies at Harvard University and Co-Founder of the [Sikh Coalition](#).

Our final vignette features a conversation with Pluralism Project founder Diana Eck who will talk with us more about issues of religious accommodation in the workplace.

But first we’ll give you a little background on the [Five K’s in Sikhism](#), which you can learn more about in [On Common Ground](#).

[Vignette 1: The Five K’s in Sikhism]

Summary: In the first vignette, Danish Zaidi, Research Associate at the [Pluralism Project](#), reads the [On Common Ground](#) audio essay “[The Five K’s in Sikhism](#).”

Rachel: Here's Danish Zaidi, Research Associate at the Pluralism Project reading the [On Common Ground](#) audio essay "[The Five K's in Sikhism](#)."

Danish: Sikh men in America and throughout the world are easily recognized because of their turbans, flowing beards and stainless steel wristbands. The turban, or *dastar*, is an essential symbol of the Sikh faith, worn in fulfillment of one of the basic vows of Sikhs: to never cut one's hair but to let it grow naturally as a sign of complete dedication to God. Both men and women keep this vow, women typically wear a long head scarf called *achunni* and men wear the turban.

This marker of Sikh identity is one of the five basic vows in Sikhism. These five vows are called the "Five K's" because each vow begins with the letter "k" in Punjabi.

The first vow is *Kes*. *Kes* means simply "hair" and refers to keeping hair uncut. The second is *Kirpan*, meaning a short sword or knife. The third K is *Karha*, a steel wristband, worn as a symbol of restraint and as a representation of bonding to the community. The fourth is *Kangha*, a wooden comb worn in the hair knot, to symbolize a clean mind and body. And finally, the fifth is *Kacchera*, which are shorts, worn as an undergarment, symbolizing chastity.

In 1699, the Sikhs, besieged with troubles and at war with the Mughal government of northern India, rallied around Guru Gobind Singh. At this time, Guru Gobind Singh performed the Sikh initiation ceremony, creating an intensely dedicated group of Sikhs willing to give their all for the Sikh community. This group was called the [Khalsa](#). The unwavering observance of the Five K's became the mark of the Khalsa, and, by aspiration, that of the whole Sikh community. Many Sikhs have not taken [initiation into the Khalsa](#), but still keep these distinctive emblems of Sikh identity.

Each of the five K's has a practical function. For instance, the *kangha* is used to comb the long, uncut hair and the *kirpan* is a weapon with which the Sikh is obliged to protect the oppressed. However the Five K's gradually attained a deep symbolic significance as well. A 1991 newsletter of the Colorado Singh Sabha in Denver describes this dimension: Keeping uncut hair "is an integral part of the natural state of human beings." It signifies "surrender of one's ego to the Guru" and represents the "declaration that one leads one's life according to the way of the Guru." The *kirpan* is "the sword of knowledge, which has cut the roots of ego." The bracelet is a reminder "to shed falsehood and practice universal love." Its perfect circular shape is also understood as a symbol of the eternal nature of God. The comb not only keeps the hair clear, but keeps the mind inwardly clean; and the shorts refer to sexual fidelity and the ethical value of overcoming lust.

Sikh identity means aligning one's life with the truth of *Ek Onkar*, the One God. The five K's continually remind Sikhs of the ethical and spiritual implications of this truth.

To learn more about the religion of [Sikhism](#) or one of the 17 other traditions profiled by the

Pluralism Project, visit pluralism.org/ocg and click on [Religion](#).

[Vignette 2: Court Encounters]

Summary: In the second vignette, Rachel and Usra read portions from the [On Common Ground](#) audio essays “[The Five K’s and the Courts](#)” and “[Encounter in the Courts](#).” [Dr. Harpreet Singh](#), Professor of South Asian Studies at Harvard University and Co-Founder of the [Sikh Coalition](#) will also discuss challenges Sikhs face in the workplace and across the US more broadly.

Usra: [Sikh immigration](#) to the U.S. began during a period when anti-Asian sentiment was already growing among the European-American pioneers and settlers of the West. While the first wave of anti-Asian sentiment was aimed at Chinese and Japanese immigrants, in the early 1900’s Indians also began to be targeted. All down the Pacific coast, turban-wearing Sikhs were referred to in popular slang as “[ragheads](#).” By 1907, an anti-immigrant group called the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League, changed its name to the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) in order to widen its exclusion agitation to include all “Asiatics—Indians” as well. Many AEL members were also involved in the organized labor movement and helped to spread the view that “Asiatic” immigrants were a menace to American workers.

It is not surprising then that in later twentieth-century America, Sikhs have had to defend the right to wear their five sacred symbols of faith. Many of these [cases](#) have set important legal precedents.

Uncut hair was the issue in 1984 for Manjit Singh Bhatia, a California machinist. He brought action against the Chevron company, which had removed him from his job because of its policy requiring employees who might be exposed to toxic gasses to shave facial hair that might prevent them from achieving an airtight seal when wearing a respirator. Bhatia filed suit against Chevron for religious discrimination. He had been working at Chevron as a machinist for several years before the new safety requirements were set in place. He argued that he could not shave his facial hair because of the vow of devout Sikhs to maintain uncut hair. Chevron offered him several other positions, with lower pay than that of a machinist and promised to return him to a machinist’s position if a respirator were developed that he could safely use. The Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals held that Chevron had “made good-faith efforts” to accommodate the plaintiff’s religious beliefs and to go further would have caused “undue hardship” to the company.

In another case dating back to 1981, the U.S. District Court in Atlanta, Georgia considered a case brought by a Sikh who applied for a position at Sambo’s Restaurant and was denied a job because “the employer required clean-shaven restaurant personnel in accordance with the industry’s recognition that clean-shaven personnel are necessary in family restaurants.” Mohan Singh Tucker had been employed at a Pizza Hut and had applied for a managerial position

advertised by Sambo's. In an interview Tucker was told he would not meet the grooming standards of Sambo's. The chain's public image policy, applied uniformly in more than 1,000 restaurants since 1957, is based on Sambo's judgment that its clientele "prefer restaurants whose managers and employees are clean-shaven." The court ruled in favor of Sambo's.

These challenges have been presented to Sikhs workers in the education system, as well. Janet Cooper is a public school teacher in Oregon who became a Sikh and adopted the white turban and the white garb that members of the Sikh Dharma wear. (Sikh Dharma is an American Sikh movement that was founded in 1969). In the late 1980s, Cooper was dismissed from her position, in compliance with an Oregon statute providing "No teacher in any public school shall wear any religious dress while engaged in the performance of duties as a teacher." The case was reviewed by the Supreme Court of Oregon which reviewed and upheld the Oregon law, opting for the "child's right to the free exercise and enjoyment of its religious opinions or heritage, untroubled by being out of step with those of the teacher."

Although America's Sikhs faced challenges in the workplace due to their religious garb prior to 9/11, [after 9/11](#) these challenges intensified for the entire Sikh community. In 2005, Kevin Harrington, a Sikh subway operator, brought a case against The Metropolitan Transit Authority after being told he must remove his turban or affix a logo to it. Failure to comply would mean that Harrington, whose quick action on the morning of September 11, 2001 saved the lives of passengers on his train, would be removed from his post and reassigned to working in a storage yard. Harrington's case and several others brought against the MTA by the Sikh Coalition and the Center for Constitutional Rights led to the change in MTA policy. The MTA announced in May 2012 that it would change the uniform policy to accommodate Sikh and Muslim employees. Today, no logo is required, but religious headwear must be blue to match MTA uniforms.

In 2010, two Sikhs were granted exceptions by the U.S. Army to serve in active duty while wearing a turban. These exceptions, the first in the nearly twenty-five year history of the prohibition on "conspicuous" items of faith, are small concessions but they will no doubt have long-term implications as Sikhs continue to lobby on issues important to their religious identity.

Dr. Singh: My name is [Harpreet Singh](#), I am a fellow at [Harvard](#), I teach in the department of [South Asian studies](#). I focus on religious nationalism and literary cultures.

So I was in New York in 2001, I was working on Wall Street in banking. During this time I was volunteering at a Sikh Gurdwara teaching ESL to immigrant women. I got to know a lot of working class people who were impacted in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy. You had taxi drivers who were being shot in Manhattan, there were people who used to be gas station attendants who were assaulted, and many of these people went to the police and the police decided to ignore their cases. I was helping them negotiate the process and figure out a way to address these problems.

And another important way in which I tried to help these people impacted was by going to the media. And one person who was very receptive was Deborah Kong of the Associated Press. One question she asked us was whether the Sikhs had a national organization that could do some of this work formally on behalf of these victims. Our response was we don't, but we could create one! And that is what we did and that is how the [Sikh Coalition](#) was founded. There was a major incident, [Balbir Singh Sodhi was shot dead](#) on September 18 in Mesa, Arizona and that became an important moment for all of us who were engaged in advocacy work to do something concrete about this.

I was the Director of Community Relations and what that meant was I was asked to deal with faith groups. I was involved in putting together a coalition of faith-based organizations to end the discrimination case with the NYPD. The NYPD was not permitting Sikhs to enter the police department with their turbans and beards, so I organized a large number of faith-based organizations and we did a press conference at the [Interfaith Center of New York](#) where we flew in Sikh police officers from Canada, United Kingdom, Singapore, in their uniforms and their turbans and beards. The support we got from Christian, Jewish, Muslim organizations was tremendous and that helped us get media attention and bring the case in front of important legislators.

The discrimination is pervasive, its not restricted to one profession. So for example, there was a woman named [Kawaljeet Tagore](#), she was working for the IRS as an agent and she was in a federal building in Texas and she was essentially prohibited from wearing her kirpan and when she refused, she was fired from her job. The IRS itself admitted under oath in court that there were shaper objects in the workplace than the kirpan. Yet despite that, they were not willing to give her equal opportunity, they wanted her to choose between practicing her religion or working for a living, so this became a very contentious issue.

The best way to grapple with these sort of issues is to first begin by educating one's employer. Begin by educating human resource departments, giving them literature about the turban, about the kirpan, whatever is causing them to discriminate against Sikhs. Also to educate one's peers about Sikh beliefs, invite them to attend a service at a gurdwara, giving them some sort of degree of literacy about the Sikh tradition is really important.

Sikh Americans have been part of the American fabric for the last 100 years and they are here to stay. What we are seeing as the second and third generation are growing up, they are going into all sorts of different fields that they have not gone into traditionally. Traditionally they have gone into medicine and engineering. Now you see them going into journalism, there is Sikh councilman in Hoboken, [Ravi Bhalla](#). There was a Sikh that fought on the Republican ticket in Chicago. Sikhs are more visible in public life, before Sikhs were very insular in their communities. Because of 9/11, the positive impact was that it forced Sikhs to come out and engage with the neighbors. I think as more of that happens I think things look very positive so I am not at all pessimistic about the future.

Rachel: Sikhs are not the only religious group that has had encounters in the US courts regarding religion in the workplace.

The United States Constitution both prohibits the establishment of religion and protects the free exercise of religion. These twin principles have guided what have been called “church-state” relations in the United States. Cases involving the First Amendment principles of non-establishment of religion and free exercise of religion have often posed difficult questions. Sometimes the two principles almost seem to be in tension: the free exercise of religion calls for special protection, while the non-establishment of religion prohibits any such special treatment. Since the second half of the twentieth century, “church-state” issues in America increasingly have been on the agenda of courts. Every year, the Supreme Court rules on a number of cases that have made their way through the appeals process to the highest court in the land--many of which relate to the appropriate place of visible religious practices in a workplace setting.

The 1963 case *Sherbert v. Verner* set a precedent that guided religious liberty decisions for thirty years. The case came from South Carolina where Adell Sherbert, a Seventh-Day Adventist, was fired from her job because she refused to accept a schedule requiring her to work on Saturday, her Sabbath, and was then refused state unemployment compensation. In her case, the Supreme Court considered three questions to guide their decision: Would her religious freedom be infringed or burdened by some government action? If so, was there a “compelling state interest” that would nonetheless justify the government action? Finally, was there any other way the government interest can be satisfied without restricting religious liberty? In sum, religious liberty is the priority; any alternative ruling can be justified only by a “compelling state interest.” In the *Sherbert* case, the Court ruled in Ms. Sherbert's favor--arguing that there was no state interest compelling enough to warrant the burden placed upon Ms. Sherbert's religious freedom.

Altering government procedures to accommodate various religious practices was also at stake in the 1986 case of *Goldman v. Weinberger*. Dr. Goldman, an Orthodox Jewish psychiatrist serving in the U.S. Air Force, insisted on his right to wear his yarmulke while on hospital duty, even though Air Force regulations prohibited a uniformed officer from wearing a head covering inside. The Air Force insisted that its code of military discipline requires that it not continually make exceptions. The Court concluded that the compelling state interest test did not apply to the military. Deferring to the Air Force's judgment, the Court upheld the regulation as constitutional, and for a time, Dr. Goldman was forced to remove his yarmulke while on duty.

You can read more of this [audio essay](#) and many others at pluralism.org/ocg. Click on “[Encounter](#)” to read essays on [Today's Challenges](#) and [Historical Perspectives](#).

[Vignette 3: Discussing Religion in the Workplace with Dr. Diana Eck]

Summary: In the final vignette, Rachel and Usra speak with [Pluralism Project](#) founder [Diana Eck](#) about contemporary issues of religious accommodation in the workplace.

Usra: Our last vignette mentioned the case of an Orthodox Jewish psychiatrist in the US Air Force. This relates to some recent developments in the case of the US Defence Department's treatment of minority religious practitioners.

I'll quote from a [Washington Post](#) article:

The Defense Department released regulations in January ensuring the rights of religious-minority service members to display their beliefs outwardly — such as wearing a turban, scarf or beard — as long as the practices do not interfere with military discipline, order or readiness.

According to the Pentagon, requests for such religious accommodation will still be decided on an individual basis but will generally be denied only if the item impairs the safe use of military equipment; poses a health or safety hazard; interferes with wearing a uniform, a helmet or other military gear; or "impairs the accomplishment of the military mission." Endquote.

Rachel: Usra and I are chatting about this contemporary issue with [Diana Eck](#), the founder of the [Pluralism Project](#) and Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University.

The interesting thing about this article is that while the new regulations were largely praised by many leaders of national Muslim American organizations, certain Sikh American groups, such as the [Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund](#), critiqued the regulations for not going far enough, primarily because the accommodations are still decided on a case-by-case basis. So my first question is, are these new regulations a "win" for pluralism or the opposite?

Dr. Eck: That's a really interesting question. There is a sense in which a case by case basis is probably going to be important for the military because people serve in the military in so many different ways.

I think the first Sikh who was serving as a captain in the US army and was allowed to serve wearing his turban (and that really involved some struggle as well) was not in the combat troops. He was not wearing a gas mask or anything. He was a dentist who had been trained by the military ROTC and the rest of the military support, so it was kind of a no brainer (much as it was eventually with the Jewish doctor wearing a yarmulke) that in their line of duty, expressing their religious convictions through what they felt to be mandatory religious gear was not interfering

with their line of duty.

I'm not sure exactly what they have in mind specifically in the Defense Department. Obviously the units of the United States military are different (the Army, the Marines, the Navy, etc.) and the kinds of tasks that they're meant to undertake are different. So we need to think about that. What are the specific reasons that Sikhs find this *not* going far enough?

Usra: Let's ask a really controversial question. Is this case about the efficiency and safety of our religiously diverse service men and women or is it about religious ignorance and intolerance?

Dr. Eck: That's a very good question. I think it's probably more about issues of efficiency and safety. You have to look at this over the long run. There have been eras in our history--I remember [that] the young Sikh that was involved with the Pluralism Project early on from Chicago was not allowed even to be in a military school wearing his turban. And the argument, really, in the military was that this kind of distinctive dress disrupts the coherence of the unit, which is so important in military service. Now I think that is not present anymore.

So, I think there certainly remains a good bit of ignorance in just about every quarter of our lives in the United States about different religious communities and certainly about the Sikhs. But I have a feeling this is the beginning of a step that is going to enable Sikhs to serve in ways that they have in many other places in the world.

I think it was years ago that the government of Canada said that Sikhs could serve in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police which is their, sort of, Blue Ribbon unit. And of course, Sikhs have served very honorably and for a long time in the military of the government of India. So I think we will get there. This is probably the first step.

Rachel: In thinking about not only the military but also businesses and other corporations, what kind of advice or suggestions would you offer or what more do you think could be done to make businesses and corporations that are hiring religiously diverse people more accommodating and more accepting for minority religious practices and beliefs?

Dr. Eck: That's such an important question because I think if you look at the list of ways in which the most visible minorities, namely women wearing hijab and Sikh men wearing turbans, there are many many cases of discrimination in the work place.

"You can't wear that headscarf while serving pizza unless you put a baseball cap over it" or something like that. Or in the case of a Sikh gentleman a few years ago; being a Sikh in one of the big restaurant chains gave a signal that was not consistent with this being a "family restaurant." Those issues are decided on a case by case basis by people bringing them to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or to local authorities throughout the country. And there are so many of those cases.

I think the important thing is that while companies everywhere do some kind of diversity training, because of the importance of issues of equal right in our society and that means diversity training that includes race; that includes gender issues and GLBT issues. But it's very interesting that most of those corporations do not include religion as something that is important for the diversity training of their employees. And I think we need to break that barrier because religion is one of the things that is really critical in the workplace.

The United States does have the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, specifically to look at the workplace in relation to our commitment to equality on the basis of race and religion and in most places, on the basis of sexual orientation. So there usually is a case that can be made. The question is, what's the best way to address this?

I think the courts are certainly one way, but most of these cases are very much local. And I think there needs to be a broader ethos, even among the groups that do diversity training, that the diversity of the workplace is much broader than race and sexual orientation which are some of the first things they think about. The religious diversity of the workplace.

Now, maybe the lead can be taken here by big corporations, because most large corporations in the United States are international multinationals. Their workforce is global. What Dunkin Donuts does in the United States resounds, in a way, in what Dunkin Donuts does in Indonesia, where, to my surprise, they also have franchises.

Religious diversity in the workplace, I think, can be addressed if we can begin to work with groups that do diversity training and say, "Understanding the religious communities of your neighbors in the workplace is really critical."

You mentioned [On Common Ground](#). Absolutely! This is a free of charge resource that corporations could put on their workers' websites, on their human development website. How is it that people can learn about who those folks are or whom they meet at the water fountain or something like that.

Usra: I'm glad you brought up the theme of the courts and laws that discourage discrimination on the basis of religion. I was just at the [Harvard Law School's](#) first [Faith & Legal Practice interfaith conference](#) and a major theme of conversation was that religious encounters in their field are rarely about outward exhibitions of faith (the way that we've been talking about this in conflicts surrounding the hijab or the wearing of turbans) and more about the ethical dilemmas faced by legal practitioners as they struggle to uphold their morals in a system that encourages reinterpreting facts or gray areas.

I'm wondering if you can speak to how we should understand these types of encounters that are less visible but still very much rooted in religious practice and encounters of various religions in the workplace.

Dr. Eck: It's certainly true, and I'm so delighted that Harvard Law School convened people from student groups in different religious orientations because legal practice is certainly one of the areas in which one's clients come from a whole variety of religious communities and with a lot of concerns that relate not so much to the legal status but to the ways in which the relationship between lawyer and client develops.

You mentioned that there were clients who asked the lawyer to pray with them and many lawyers would not be comfortable with this. On the other hand, there are cases that come before the courts that involve family law, that involve relations within a family and would require a lawyer to know a lot more about the ways in which religious communities conceptualize the relationship between the members of the family.

There are longstanding groups like the [Christian Legal Society](#) that basically advocate solving many of the kinds of disputes between Christians out of the courts because there is a sense in which going to the courts is the last resort after you've failed at Christian conciliation, you might say. So there are a lot of issues that come up. There are normal issues about whether someone who is in legal practice can have any kind of religious paraphernalia in his or her private office--whether a judge can have that; whether you can keep a motto about the Ten Commandments, for example, in your own chambers. What's private, what's public? What sends a signal that makes the lawyer or the client uncomfortable with the relationship?

Rachel: I'm wondering if you can speak to any examples of places where things have gone right--if you know of any examples of corporations or any sort of workplace that has set an example as a place that's more welcoming for people that practice a variety of faiths.

Dr. Eck: I'm trying to think of places that have made a real distinctive mark in the workplace. A few years ago I came to know that the Ford Motor Company had it's own interfaith organization, and that's interesting.

They had so many requests for different kinds of religious services and accommodation in the workplace that they thought well, maybe what we really oughta do is have one kind of organization here in the Ford Motor Company that accommodates and brings people together, not to pray together, but [one] that recognizes the diversity of our workplace. That's an increasingly significant fact.

I'm not exactly sure of the companies that are most progressive in this respect. Maybe with some of your research, you can think about them. Even our federal government is not necessarily the most progressive. They still debate what it is that can be accommodated in the workplace. In the federal workplace, there are a set of guidelines that would say yes, you can express your religious beliefs at the water fountain or wherever you want in relation to your co-religionists and people of other faiths as well. And yet, where in your own office can you keep religious symbols in a federal workplace?

These are tough issues. They're new issues in so many ways. I might mention one of the people who was involved in the Pluralism Project early on. He's a man named [Douglas Hicks](#) who really took this question on in relation to thinking about religion at work. He wrote a book published not so long ago, in 2003, called *Religion in the Workplace* and there are not that many people who steer into this. He began in leadership studies at the University of Richmond and now is the Provost at Colgate University, I believe, Provost and Dean of the Faculty. So this is an area that he has pioneered and worked on originally as a Pluralism Project researcher about 20 years ago.

Usra: So I am glad you mentioned that trajectory. I wonder, how have you seen conversations about this change over time since this sort of beginnings of the Pluralism Project? Recently I was reading about the Ground Zero mosque controversy, the Cordoba House issue, and one of the articles was reporting on the challenges of building a mosque near the site of Ground Zero. One of the articles wrote about how there had been Muslims praying in the Pentagon for a while up until that point and so there is a lot, as someone coming into this, myself being new to this conversation, I wonder, how far back do these conversations go? Or are we in a sort of milestone, is this a new movement now where people are starting to think about religion in the workplace?

Dr. Eck: Its so interesting because I think having done this kind of research now for 20 years plus, I do see a development, a trajectory. But at the same time, I realize that many people are in a time bubble of their own time. So when we first started looking at issues of the recognition of our diversity, it was kind of a big deal that the Governor of Kansas, for example, recognized in a proclamation the month of Ramadan and congratulated the Muslims. Of course that kind of public recognition and congratulations on the occasion of holidays and observances is something that is pretty old in American society, but was gradually expanding to include many other religious communities. And I remember the days when there were specific and not very many cases brought by Sikhs, for example, to protest whether or not they could wear the turban while serving in the Los Angeles police department. And then there were many cases that involved citings of mosques and Hindu temples, the sort of "Not in my Neighborhood" kind of protests that came from that, and that was all the way through the 1990's.

The first *iftars* or the fast-breaking gatherings at the end of the day of Ramadan fasting took place in the 90's in the Pentagon, in the US Congress offices, because these are places that had a diversity of employees that were observing Ramadan. And of course 9/11 did change things in terms of public consciousness. So now when you start looking at cases of discrimination against Sikhs for example, in terms of headgear, that came up almost immediately with the founding of the Sikh Coalition in New York, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, realizing that this became a target of discrimination and in some cases, violence.

And so I think the ramping up of awareness in the last 10 years and more, awareness of our diversity as people, has also brought to the fore more cases of, what do we do in the workplace? More cases of how do we handle things in the government? How do we handle them in the

schools? Et cetera. Because we are increasingly aware of the expansion of that great American “We.” Who are we? And we are much more complex than ever before.

Rachel: I think one of the greatest resources on the Pluralism website is the mapping of this diversity across the United States, which you guys can check out if you go to pluralism.org. Literal maps of different religious centers in major cities all across the U.S. and the diversity is really really incredible.

Usra: So Professor Eck, I am wondering if you have any final words for us as we close out this final segment of our conversation about religion and the workplace. What are hopes you have for how we will be better at understanding these encounters in the future? And hopes that you have for the listeners of today’s program?

Dr. Eck: Well thank you for asking that! Because I think my hope is that we become a lot more informed as citizens, as employers about the workplace and about our co-workers. Because the answer to this can sometimes come through litigation and through all the legal cases brought up against such-and-such employer because they tried to fire a woman for what she was wearing or tried to put her in the back shop because they didn’t want her visible. Those things are important and they are milestones, but we need a much broader level of understanding about who our co-workers are.

I think Governor Jerry Brown in California signed a piece of legislation that basically said nobody can be discriminated against in the workplace on account of what they wear: turban, headscarf, whatever. Just taking that to a level that sort of solved some of the local litigation, but I think also, through his own actions, he has been someone who works not only for legal solutions but for the kind of ethical solutions, educational solutions, that the Pluralism Project has stood for, for so long.

Usra: Many thanks to Professor Diana Eck, Professor Harprit Singh, Pluralism Project Research Associate Danish Zaidi and you, our listeners, for tuning in to this episode of the Pluralism Podcast. Check out our online resource On Common Ground for more at pluralism.org.