Encounter in the Public Square

Summary: *Leaders in the public square— the military, legislatures, and governmental departments—have responded to the increasing religious diversity in the United States by appointing chaplains, inviting invocations, and recognizing holidays in religions outside of Christianity and Judaism. Often, this increased engagement leads to visible changes. For instance, military tombstones may now be bear symbols indicating one of dozens of religious traditions (or the lack thereof), from a Christian cross to a Wiccan pentacle.*

What is the "public square" in America? In broad terms, it is where Americans encounter one another and exchange ideas about matters of importance to the town, the city or the nation. In some American towns, there are still town meetings open to all. There are also school committees, PTA meetings, and civic association meetings where citizens meet face to face. Rapid advancements in communication technologies mean that issues of public importance are now discussed online—through websites, blogs, and social media venues like Facebook and Twitter—in addition to television and radio. Each of these methods of communication has impacted the most visible public square: the political arena. It is here that dramas of national identity are discussed and enacted, from state legislatures to the United States Congress, from city councils of small town America all the way to the White House. So where in the public square is there evidence of this new religious diversity and citizen engagement, these attempts to build a culture of pluralism in America?

Intentional attempts to enact social change and legal necessity are two factors that motivate pluralistic efforts in the public sphere. Political leaders connect with diverse religious groups at holiday celebrations and in the halls of legislatures, hoping to change how the American government interacts with its public to more accurately reflect the nation's religious landscape. In other public spaces, including prisons and the military, where religious diversity already exists, religious infrastructure is changing to meet the religious needs and constitutional rights of the people inside.

On February 20, 1996, at the end of the month of Ramadan, then First Lady Hillary Clinton welcomed Muslims to the White House for the first celebration of Eid ever to take place there. In her greeting, she told those who had gathered: "This celebration is an American event. We are a nation of immigrants who have long drawn on our diverse religious traditions and faiths for the strength and courage that make America great. For two centuries, we have prided ourselves on being a nation of pluralistic beliefs, united by a common faith in democracy."

One of the Muslims who spoke on this occasion was an eleven-year-old Girl Scout, Marwa al-Kairo, from Herndon, Virginia. In her green felt hat and uniform, Marwa addressed the crowd: “Only in America people from different parts of the world can come together and become one community. I am proud to be an American Muslim.” Three years before, in 1993, the Girl Scouts had widened the religious language of its pledge, allowing scouts like Marwa to affirm, “On my honor I will try to serve Allah and my country…” This inclusivity—a move that stirred controversy within national Girl Scout circles—was also extended to Buddhist and secular scouts, among others.

When a U.S. president is inaugurated, prayers are often offered during the ceremony and language used by many Inauguration Day speakers is often infused with religious overtones. President Barack Obama made history during his 2009 inaugural address when he spoke of America as “a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers.” While prayers have been offered by Protestant, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish clergy at past presidential inaugurations, there has not been a constitutional challenge to the prayers offered at this symbolic moment. Yet many ask: How should such a symbolic moment be configured in a new multireligious America? Are these considered to be prayers for the president, offered by someone from his or her religious tradition? Or are they prayers for the nation, offered by different religious leaders? Now that there are nearly as many Muslims as Jews, when will an imam offer prayers at the inauguration of a U.S. president? What about the fact that a growing number of Americans do not associate with a particular religious tradition?

Legislative prayers have been a bellwether of change in the public square. On June 25, 1991, for the first time in American history, a Muslim imam, Siraj Wahhaj of Brooklyn, opened a session of the U.S. House of Representatives with the customary invocation, offered by a member of the clergy each day before the opening of the session. In his prayer, he quoted one of the most oft-cited verses of the Qur’an: “Do you not know, O people, that I have made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other.” Newspapers throughout the country took note of this historic moment; an article in the *American Muslim Council Report* provided the text of the prayer. On February 6, 1992, Imam W. Deen Mohammed, leader of the large majority of African American Muslims, was invited to give the first-ever Islamic invocation in the U.S. Senate. State legislatures across the country have also begun to reflect a broader understanding of America’s religious diversity. Since 1992, state legislatures of Tennessee and California have both been opened by Muslim and Buddhist invocations. In 2007, Hindu and interfaith activist Rajan Zed opened Nevada’s state legislature with a Hindu invocation. Protesters

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were also on hand for Zed's prayer, shouting Christian scriptural verses before being escorted off the premises.

In 2006, Keith Ellison (D-MN) was elected to the House of Representatives, the first Muslim to serve in Congress; he was sworn in on Thomas Jefferson's personal copy of the Qu'ran. The first Muslim woman to become a mayor in the United States was sworn in thirteen years after Ellison joined the House: Sadaf Jaffer assumed office on January 3, 2019, in Montegomery Township, New Jersey. In 2008, Mazie Hirono (D-HI) and Hank Johnson (D-GA) became the first Buddhists elected to Congress, both to the House of Representatives; Hirono went on to become the first Buddhist in the Senate with her election in 2012. Also in 2012, Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) became the first Hindu to be elected to the United States Congress. Gabbard, an Iraq war veteran and the youngest person to be elected to the Hawai'i State Legislature, took the congressional oath of office on her personal copy of the Bhagavad Gita. "My Gita," she told the media, "has been a tremendous source of inner peace and strength through many tough challenges in life, including being in the midst of death and turmoil while serving our country in the Middle East." Although Bibles still remain the most common book upon which elected officials—including the president and vice president—take their oath of office, the appearance of the Bhagavad Gitas and the Qur'an on Capitol Hill reflect the increasingly diverse religious commitments of the American public.

There are many other symbolic indicators of a new awareness of religious pluralism in the public square. In April of 1990, for example, the city council of Savannah, Georgia issued a proclamation recognizing Islam to have been "a vital part of the development of the United States of America and the city of Savannah." In 1991, San Francisco recognized the annual festival honoring the Hindu deity Ganesha. An article in *India Abroad* on September 6, 1991, read: "Mayor Art Agnos has issued a proclamation declaring September 22 'Golden Gate Ganesha Visarjana Day.' It is believed to be the first time that the mayor of a city in the United States has honored the Hindu deity." Also, the festivals of America's many religious traditions are visible markers of a new pluralism in the public square. In recent decades, the Sikh Baisakhi Day and India Day parades have made their mark in New York City alongside older institutions like Chinese New Year. In 2012, an Eid al-Fitr festival was hosted at the Salt Lake City Public Library and in Irvington, New Jersey the two Islamic feast days—Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha—are among the holidays when municipal parking restrictions are waived. In 2006, a Christian pastor in El Sobrante, California decided to distribute flyers promoting Christianity during a Peace Parade sponsored

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by the local Sikh community. His actions sparked both controversy and conversation with the Sikh community, demonstrating that these visible markers of a new pluralism often do not emerge without contestation.

Organizing to have a voice in the public square has become important to many American religious communities. The Christian Coalition, the National Council of Churches, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops are all dedicated to bringing a Christian religious voice to bear on the public debate. Similarly, the American Jewish Congress and the Anti-Defamation League are among dozens of Jewish organizations to participate. The Guru Gobind Singh Foundation, a Sikh organization, in Washington, D.C. was active with many other religious groups in securing the passing of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in the early 1990s. Today, the Sikh Coalition, the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Council on American Islamic Relations, and Hindu American Foundation are but a few of the national organizations working to protect civil rights and make an impact on public policies that affect their communities and the nation more broadly.

Chaplaincies in the armed services have also begun to change with the times. Not until the 1990s were Buddhist and Muslim chaplains considered for appointment to the armed forces. Indeed, during World War II, Muslim soldiers found that they were not permitted to have “Islam” inscribed on their dog tags to indicate their religious faith. It was not an option like “Catholic” or “Jewish.” Many settled for the category “Other.” Now that has changed. The Gulf War not only raised the question of how Americans relate to the Muslim world of the Middle East, but how Americans take account of the religious diversity of the United States that now includes Islam. In 1993, Army Chaplain Lt. Col. A-Rasheed Muhammad became the first Muslim chaplain to serve in the military. In 2010, a joint school for training military chaplains from diverse backgrounds was dedicated. In 2011, Captain Pratima Dharm became the U.S. Army’s first Hindu chaplain, a post she filled at Walter Reed Medical Center in Maryland until she retired from the military in 2014.

The presence of other religious traditions, however, has been met with resistance from within the military. In 2006, Chaplain Don Larsen was withdrawn from the Chaplain Service Corps when he sought to change his endorsement from a Pentecostal Christian organization to a Pagan group, a move he felt reflected his own personal journey. Wiccans in particular have faced an uphill battle to have the

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pentacle, a symbol of their faith, recognized as a legitimate option for government-issued grave markers. The five pointed star was added to the list of accepted symbols in 2007, and the total number of options is now over 70.

The campaign for lasting social and structural change regarding religious freedom within the military is ongoing. The Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a watchdog organization founded by lawyer and Air Force Academy graduate Michael Weinstein, successfully challenged the inclusion of "so help me God" from the Academy's Honor Oath, and the MRFF continually lodges complaints in an effort to build a "wall separating church and state in the U.S. military." Another group, the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, opposes the idea that "there are no atheists in foxholes," although the idea of humanist and atheist military chaplains has met formal resistance in Congress.

The prison system has also confronted new questions in an increasingly multireligious America. Islam was not recognized as a religious tradition in the prison system until 1962, a change brought about by litigation from Muslim prisoners *(Fulwood v. Vlemmer).* In the decades since then, however, Muslims have had to resort to litigation in one case after another to secure rights to religious services and the right to pray *salat* (five daily prayers). Securing *halal* food remains a struggle in many prisons, with lawsuits in Ohio, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island garnering national headlines. In 1975, the first Muslim prison chaplain was hired by the state of New York; the New York State prison now has more than thirty Muslim chaplains, many of whom are a part of the Association of Muslim Chaplains, and a vigorous program of Islamic study. Marin County, California, has an Interfaith Jail Chaplaincy sponsored by the Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. Organizations like Muslim Chaplain Services of Virginia also seek to support Muslim inmates. Simultaneously, organizations like the Prison Dharma Network have led the way in bringing Buddhist meditation, spirituality, and rehabilitation to the United States prison system.

Public discussion of these civic issues often unites leaders and organizations of diverse religious traditions. In responding to the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, for example, Muslim leaders from the American Muslim Council joined with leaders of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to issue a joint public statement deploring any attempt to justify terrorism and violence in the name of religion. In a joint statement at the time of the U.N. Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the two national bodies articulated their common views on the family

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and the “sanctity of human life.” The 9/11 Unity Walk is another example of a public interfaith response to a national crisis. The walk began in 2005 along Embassy Row in Washington, D.C. and has become an annual event that attracts over 1,000 participants and is broadcast nationally and internationally.

Increasingly, the public square is a space where the voices of people of many religious traditions are heard. In the early 1980s, Richard John Neuhaus warned of the “naked public square” in which religious values were in danger of being excluded from public discussion. He might have had in mind something like the 2011 decision by organizers of the 9/11 tenth anniversary service at Yankee Stadium to not invite any religious leaders to participate in the ceremony. Their actions drew sharp criticism, highlighting the fact that today it is more likely that the American public square is becoming the “multireligious public square” where many new voices contribute to the public discussion.

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