



Global Experts

Analysis on demand

Private Beliefs, Public Change

May 9th, 2011, by Eboo Patel

Chicago- When the suicide bomb exploded as worshippers left New Year's mass at a Coptic church in Alexandria, 21 people died and 79 were wounded. It's hard to imagine a more grim, ghastly, or tragic way to ring in a new decade.



But during Coptic Christmas later that month, Egyptian Muslims formed a human wall around the church, ensuring peaceful worship and demonstrating the utmost respect for their Christian compatriots. In an act of equal loyalty, Egyptian Christians formed a human chain around Muslims during *jumu'ah* prayers in Tahrir Square during the mass demonstrations in February.

What can we make of this? Rev. Jim Wallis, a leading progressive Evangelical voice in America, has a saying: "God is personal, but never private." By imagining religion only as a private affair, we ignore the important public elements of faith – whether it means garnering strength from prayer during times of chaos or living out religious convictions by protecting others so they can practice freely.

The truth is each of the world religions call us to engage with one another in public ways, whether it is to house the homeless, feed the hungry, or steward the earth. No matter how we envision heaven, it's hard to find a religion or philosophical tradition that doesn't call followers to contribute to our common life here on earth. In taking up this charge religion cannot help but appear in our public square.

Today's challenge comes from the increasing frequency and intensity with which individuals from different backgrounds interact. The 21st century reveals a unique combination of diversity and proximity in a world shaped by the forces of globalization and new technologies. Our societies are growing increasingly religiously diverse – and that doesn't necessarily serve us well.

Sociologist Robert Putnam's – author *Bowling Alone* – research reveals that diversity and social capital are often inversely correlated, meaning the more diverse a community or city is, the less trust between citizens, the lower rates of voting, and the higher rates of crime. But Putnam also articulates a concept that we can use to strengthen social capital in the midst of diversity. He calls this "bridging social capital," which means intentionally engaging diverse communities in ways that encourage positive relationships, emphasize shared values, and multiply trust and volunteerism.

Brown University political economist Ashutosh Varshney shows how bridging social capital can play an important role in preventing conflict during tense situations. In his study of communal

violence in India, Varshney found a significant difference between cities in India that remained relatively calm during times of interreligious tension and cities that exploded in sectarian violence. Cities that remained calm had “networks of engagement”: civic organizations that brought people from different backgrounds together on a regular basis. When tensions flared, people knew each other well enough to not want to harm their neighbors, and possessed basic tools to prevent tensions from escalating into violence.

As we see from Putnam and Varshney’s research, religious diversity, if engaged intentionally, can strengthen our communities and boost social capital and cohesion.

The best way we have found to build bridges between diverse religious communities is through interfaith cooperation: working together across lines of faith to serve the common good. By starting with the common value of service that is shared by the spectrum of world religions, we can take action together to improve our communities while building networks of trust and understanding between individuals and groups that may have previously been suspicious of, uninformed about, or nervous around one another. By tackling pressing issues of local or global concern – whether it’s building a house, cleaning up a park, or raising money for bed nets – we are able to advance a new understanding about and between one another.

Right now, on over 75 American college campuses, student leaders are recognizing that religion in public life is a critical issue of the 21st century, and are stepping up to the challenge. Students are organizing social action campaigns, bringing together thousands who believe that though they come from diverse faiths and traditions, they can make the world better together.

They have found a striking, two-fold impact of their work. Not only are they making concrete improvements to their communities, but at the same time – like their courageous peers in Egypt- they are publicly modeling the possibility of bridging the faith divide, proving there is a different way to relate to each other, based on cooperation rather than conflict.

Let’s learn from young leaders around the world, and not wait for the next tragedy to prove we’re better together.

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