CONVERGENCE
Introduction: What “Convergence” Actually Looks Like

By Nora Bond

This particular issue of the Convergence Magazine represents Convergence’s many facets very well. In the next pages, you will find an article detailing a new state-wide religious accommodation policy, a piece weaving environmentalism with Hindu ideals, a conversation that links student wellness, intramurals, and strategic planning, and a book review that was equal parts review and call to action. I am so glad issue two of our second volume has found its way to you, because I bet your work on a college campus is just as varied.

Of course, these articles are united, too, and I will outline the themes by way of an introduction. The news out of Washington state is incredibly heartening to all of those who work for the rights of minority religions in the United States. Thanks to the work of Byron Dondoyano and Mennah El-Gammal, two University of Washington student leaders whom you will meet in the Administration and Policy article, there is now a state-wide mandate ensuring access to religious observance accommodation. In our Opinion piece, Murali Balaji details the Hindu Earth Ethics and Climate Action conference at Yale University this February. He describes the Hindu imperative to unite for change, given the understood sacredness of our earth and the inherent interconnectedness of life. Then, Amy Rio shares her Promising Practices interview with Brennan Coon, Rochester Institute of Technology’s Assistant Director at the Center for Recreational Sports. Coon participated in Convergence’s Regional Training at RIT this past fall. Coon’s role in student wellness means he thinks about sports, spirituality, and student identity continuously—not as disparate components, but as integral experiences. Finally, in our book review by Eli Herb, you will be introduced to Celene Ibrahim’s new anthology One Nation, Indivisible: Seeking Liberty and Justice from the Pulpit to the Streets. Ibrahim,
a Convergence Board Member, crafted this text as a pragmatic yet reflective guide to civic engagement, with a lens into the lived Islamic experience; Herb’s review is not a summary so much as a story itself, appealing to the humanity in all of us.

This is Convergence at its finest, I think. From a governor’s office to the conference hall, from the gym to the classroom, there is no campus space in which religious, secular, and spiritual identities are not present. As we see in this issue, there are no issues, from political, environmental, to physical, that do not involve religious, secular, and spiritual identities. In fact, right here we meet people who are improving their communities precisely because of their relationships to their worldviews.

This is the vision of Convergence. You can read more about the origin of our name in The Vocabulary of Our Work, and in this issue you can experience the name. State legislators converging on the injustice of a Christian-normative calendar. Hindus and the like-minded converging on a global, urgent issue. A group of campus professionals converging on strategic change to enhance their institutions. A group of writers, thinkers, and poets converging to articulate a vision for engaged, pluralistic society. United by a just cause, seeming divergence starts to look like, well, Convergence.

We welcome and expect your feedback on these pieces on Facebook. I am so proud to work with the people who coordinate, write, edit, and design this magazine. I am also proud to deliver this issue to you, a practitioner doing your own version of Convergence every day as you navigate variety and separateness and seek to make it cohesive. Finally, we ask you to consider submitting an article for publication in the magazine. See the Call for Submissions at the end of the issue for more information.

Happy reading, happy May, and the whole Convergence team wishes you a happy summer.
When individuals in higher education begin the process of addressing Christian privilege on their campuses, often the first inequitable structure noticed is the academic calendar. The reason for this is simple: “the academic calendar privileges Christian students because it is designed around Christian holidays” (Schlosser & Sendlacek, 2003, p. 31). Unfortunately, the solution to this fundamental privileging of one religious group’s holidays over all others’ can be quite difficult to determine, given the entrenched nature of many institutions’ schedules. Some institutions have worked around this problem by allowing students to request religious accommodations from their professors. However, if the decision to grant or deny the request is determined on a case-by-case basis, “the authorities have power to either agree to or deny these requests for accommodation based on their limited or narrow understanding of the practices of other faith communities” (Blumenfeld, 2006, p. 205).

This situation began to change at one campus, the University of Washington (UW), in May 2017. That’s when Byron Dondoyano, then a sophomore, voluntarily participated in a week of fasting with his Muslim friends and peers during the holy month of Ramadan. Dondoyano, who is non-religious and describes himself as an “ally,” called this an act designed to intentionally increase his empathy toward others. The loss of energy and concentration he experienced during this period convinced him that forcing students to take exams while fasting was unfair, and that this was a problem that needed to be fixed at UW.

Dondoyano was moved to champion a bill in the university’s student senate requiring faculty members to accommodate students’ religious needs, if they come into conflict with exams. The specific goal was “establishing a policy that creates an affirming and empowering platform for all students, from all religious and cultural backgrounds, to request accommodations when it is appropriate.” This would benefit Muslim students as well as those from other religious backgrounds, including Jewish students who might be faced with a final scheduled on a Saturday and Orthodox Christians observing Christmas in January.

This was not a solo effort. Dondoyano worked together with many others on the UW campus, in particular then-junior Mennah El-Gammal, the Middle Eastern Student Commission Director, who led the efforts to build an on-campus coalition. El-Gammal says that the initial work they did included conducting research, lobbying, and “making sure that people understood what it [the bill] meant and voted for it.”
Their efforts paid off, as the bill received unanimous support from the student commissions, which represent protected groups on campus. Subsequently, the non-binding bill passed the student senate, representing the opinion of 30,000 undergraduate students.

While the bill passed easily in the student senate, its status as non-binding meant that faculty would not be required to comply with its recommendations. It first appeared to Dondoyano and El-Gammal that the faculty senate, made up of approximately 150 representatives from three UW campuses, would be the next logical place to bring the bill. They went on to present the bill at a sub-committee meeting and were met with mixed reactions: both a “warm reception” and “a lot of concern,” according to Dondoyano. El-Gammal describes much of the concern as coalescing around the process and mechanisms for the accommodations, rather than the need for them itself. It soon became clear to Dondoyano that the faculty senate would only consider passing “symbolic, non-binding” legislation – and that would be after a year-long process of deliberation. To Dondoyano and El-Gammal, this did not satisfactorily meet the needs of students. The collaborators therefore decided to take a much bigger step: passing legislation in the state of Washington.

Dondoyano’s first chance to work on this new idea came when he participated in UW’s student lobby day at the state legislature in

Follow the progress of the bill in the Washington State legislature

Dondoyano, Professor Bryan White, and El-Gammal testifying at the WA State Senate
Olympia, WA in January 2018. During this event, he met with State Senator Bob Hasegawa, the sponsor of Senate Bill 5173, nicknamed the “days of faith bill.” Enacted in 2014, the law “grants public employees the option of taking two new unpaid holidays on days that suit their personal faith or conscience” (Senate Democrats, 2014). Dondoyano expected that Senator Hasegawa’s history would make him amenable to working on a bill for religious accommodation on public college and universities campuses, and indeed, it did. The Senator immediately offered to act as the primary sponsor of the bill. El-Gammal notes that Senator Hasegawa’s staff developed the bill more quickly than the students expected, making it ready for presentation during the current legislative year.

During this time period, El-Gammal focused on drawing in on-campus supporters, in her words “trying to inform students who would be particularly impacted or invested … in this bill,” including her fellow commission leaders. She also leaned on her role as the Middle Eastern Student Commission Director to influence the opinions of faculty members, noting that when advocacy “comes from an organization representing diversity on campus, it holds a little more weight than it would, [coming from] just a singular student.” Despite this, some faculty did have an interest in avoiding “the state dictating very much what goes on in their classrooms or how they operate.”

External resources were mainly Dondoyano’s purview. In addition to Senator Hasegawa, he acquired the support of several external organizations while developing the legislative bill. These organizations included the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Anti-Defamation League, the Jewish Federation, the Faith Action Network, and others. Cedar Law, LLC, signed on pro bono as legal advisors. Dondoyano and El-Gammal were also mentored by Cody Nielsen, Founder and Executive Director of Convergence. When asked about working with the two UW students, Nielsen said:

The whole process has been so transformative with [Dondoyano] and [El-Gammal]. From the moment that [Dondoyano] contacted me last spring, to our in person meeting in Seattle, to the coaching calls and meetings with the Senator and their staff, I have seen in both [Dondoyano] and [El-Gammal] the passion they hold toward this. [Dondoyano] is an especially unique student, dedicating himself to a cause that does not personally affect him, but that gives him so much joy.

Dondoyano, El-Gammal, and their team had five main recommendations for policies to include in the bill, which they described in a memorandum written in October 2018 (see sidebar for a link to the memorandum), in order to accomplish the goal of establishing “a platform for students to receive religious accommodations as needed to uphold constitutional standards for rights of free exercise.” These recommendations were:

1. Mandate universal, required adoption of publishing religious accommodations policy
2. Mandate universal, required inclusion of a page or a link to religious holidays
3. Mandate universal adoption of a religious accommodations statement in syllabi
4. Create a guide for institutions’ point of contact for this newly adopted policy
5. Create a guide for educational assessment centers

The goal of these recommendations was to institutionalize the entire system of granting students their needed accommodations, starting with informing students of their rights and ending with a guarantee that their needs will be met. This system would impact all public colleges and universities in the state of Washington, including community colleges. Dondoyano points out that “this is not solely a University of
Washington problem,” and therefore a state-wide solution was needed. The eventual legislation would also include a method for students to submit grievances, as well as necessary deadlines to prevent students from using the rules as a last-minute attempt to delay taking an exam.

When asked why institutionalizing the accommodations system is so important, Dondoyano stated that the lack of a binding policy on faculty at the University of Washington has led to a lack of a university-wide provision of religious accommodations to students. Creating a legislative change to this problem has a two-fold purpose. The first is to “make sure that the faculty understand what the process is,” and the second, critically, is “providing that platform for students, to empower them, and to affirm their identity and tell them that they matter too, and that we accept them as who they are.” El-Gammal concurs with the importance of empowering students. When asked what it would mean to her personally for the bill to pass, she states:

On a personal level, I think – there is a tendency – at least, it’s something that I’ve felt, but when speaking to other students of at least Muslim faith, there is the same sentiment. There is a tendency to not want to push for religious accommodations or to sort of visibly peg yourself as Muslim. Not that we’re ashamed of our faith. I think it’s quite the opposite, but it’s more trying not to ... feed stereotypes I guess, that these people [Muslims] are trying to change the way that the system works or that they’re creating sort of a burden on society. And so, a lot of times, a lot of Muslims don’t want to ask for accommodations ... For me, I felt the same way ... A lot of times, I didn’t want to ask for accommodations, and I didn’t want to create what I saw was a burden, even though it’s a Constitutional right. So for me, I think, it’s powerful to see that there is legislation going through at our state level to sort of give that outlet for people and validate their religious practice, and say that you don’t have to choose between your academics and your religious practice. And that’s the thing, particularly growing up, I never thought was possible. And I think it reaffirms that, you know, you are a part of the fabric of society, and have been. It’s just, you have to learn how to push for your rights and imagine something different than what you already have.
The team faced some challenges during their senate testimony. El-Gammal describes a difficult interaction with a veteran of the Iraqi War now serving in the legislature, whose line of questioning she found particularly “disheartening,” even though it also clarified the way some public officials were erroneously assuming that religious accommodations were only being sought for Muslim students. She also feels some state senators were “very insensitive ... and showed sort of how ingrained our system is to prioritize and focus on a certain race or a certain religious group.”

Despite these occurrences, Bill SB 5166 (providing religious accommodations for postsecondary students) has already made remarkable progress, passing the Washington Senate on February 25, 2019 in a bi-partisan vote of 33-16 (see sidebar for a link to the bill tracker) and House on April 10 in a bi-partisan vote of 64-28. It will continue on for a signature from Governor Jay Inslee, whom Dondoyano believes is highly likely to sign the bill into law.

Nielsen, of Convergence, shared what he believes will be the outcome of the bill eventually becoming law (this quote was given prior to the bill passing the House on April 10):

If and when this bill passes the house, as I would expect it to, sending it to the governor to sign, we will have worked together to prove that religious, secular, and spiritual accommodations in higher education are truly a systems-wide change. Policies such as this one are the key toward institutional shifts necessary to help create a society and culture which truly values and appreciates all forms of religious, secular, and spiritual identity. It begins in our institutions, but it’s not just at a student level, it is at the level of our campus climate wherein the greatest difference takes place. My hope is that this bill produces a marker, visible on every page of syllabi in Washington State, of the value we as a society place upon supporting our religious identities. It will be for our students as a moment of reflection, of conscience awareness, and of fulfillment of the justice needed in our world.

Dondoyano has some advice for students on campuses in other states who wish to follow the lead of the University of Washington. First, he offers the reminder that empathy is key: if and when SB 5166 becomes law, Dondoyano’s own life will not be impacted, as he is non-religious and does not require holiday accommodations. It was his experience with fasting during Ramadan that motivated him to speak up with Muslim students, as he felt that “that narrative wasn’t being told.” He credits his upbringing in a “very diverse neighborhood” for his openness to people from backgrounds other than his own. Second, Dondoyano emphasizes “approaching [it] as an ally, and not the savior.” His collaboration with El-Gammal, a Muslim student leader, ensured that he would be advocating alongside Muslim students, rather than “taking this on as someone who assumes...
to know everything.” Finally, he recommends both building a network of partners and stakeholders with public platforms (such as State Senator Hasegawa) as well as personal supporters and mentors, in order to most effectively enact change.

Dondoyano shares that the process of moving the legislation forward has often been stressful and difficult, and that he has had to step back from it time to time. He always came back to the work, however, because he “knew this wasn’t about [him]; it was about fighting for groups of people who have not been represented and who haven’t had a validating voice in this fight.” That’s why, if the bill passes and after taking a much-needed break, Dondoyano hopes to take up similar legislative work in another state. For now, his “whole focus” remains on the WA State House and passing the bill there.

For her part, El-Gammal recommends that anyone wishing to emulate the efforts in Washington do their research, be open to unlikely and unexpected supporters, and make sure their argument is strong and sound. She says that students need to believe they can make a difference and then should find experienced partners with which to collaborate. She also emphasizes the critical nature of working with trusted allies. Dondoyano’s advocacy, as a non-religious peer, meant a lot to her personally:

It’s not that underrepresented groups need quote-unquote “saving,” you know, someone to save them all the time. But I think it is powerful to know that you have people who, I guess, will have your back. And I think that diversification of your coalition when trying to push forward gives you that strength. And that was really powerful.

El-Gammal will carry these lessons forward into her own career; after finishing her studies in political science at UW this spring, El-Gammal will spend the next two years in a job helping individuals gain their United States citizenship.

References
For a climate activist like me, the dearth of Hindu voices being featured prominently in conversations on climate change has been particularly disappointing.

The voices and actions have been present, but there hasn’t been a collective voice leading to collective action. The 2015 Hindu Declaration on Climate Change, endorsed by over 100 Hindu organizations and leading activists worldwide, was a great first step. The declaration read, in part:

*Today we call on all Hindus to expand our conception of dharma. We must consider the effects of our actions not just on ourselves and those humans around us, but also on all beings. We have a dharmic duty for each of us to do our part in ensuring that we have a functioning, abundant, and bountiful planet.* …

*We must base our response to climate change on a number of central principles, expanding on the truism that the Divine is all and all life is to be treated with reverence and respect: Internalising vasudhaiva kutumbakam (the family of Mother Earth), promoting sarva bhuta hita (the welfare of all beings), and acting with an understanding of karma and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.*
Climate change creates pain, suffering, and violence. Unless we change how we use energy, how we use the land, how we grow our crops, how we treat other animals, and how we use natural resources, we will only further this pain, suffering, and violence. On a personal basis, we can reduce this suffering by beginning to transform our habits, simplifying our lives and material desires, and not taking more than our reasonable share of resources.

In the four years since, however, not much collective action has taken place. But February 9, 2019 might be the day we look back upon as the day Hindus mobilized to lead on climate change. The Hindu Earth Ethics and Climate Action (HEECA) conference at historic Marsh Hall at Yale University was the culmination of months of work in bringing together climate activist leaders who are also Hindu, in order to claim a mantle of leadership in fighting an existential threat to humanity and the world.

The conference focused on three areas: the theological justifications for a Hindu intervention in climate action; the idea of tying scriptures to activism on climate change; and sharing best practices on advancing climate policies in tandem with Hindu scriptural ideals. In my over 20 years of working on issues related to climate change, this conference might have been the most aggressively practical one in terms of what ordinary citizens could do to mobilize.

HEECA was months in the making, as a small group of Hindu chaplains, including Yale’s director of Hindu Life, Asha Shipman, and climate activists, began charting out a course to bring Hindu scriptures to the forefront of climate action.

“What climate change presents is answering the question at the heart of Hinduism,” said Gopal Patel, executive director of the Bhumi Project, a U.K.-based Hindu climate action group and one of the conference’s organizers. “What does it mean to be a person in this world?”

To be sure, interfaith climate change efforts have existed for years, highlighted by the Encyclical on Climate Change by Pope Francis. But Hinduism’s philosophy on preserving the well-being of all living things fundamentally differs from the way faith-based climate activism has been framed in the West. That’s because Hinduism and other Dharmic religions like Buddhism have long argued a different model than Abrahamic faiths in combating climate change. Patel says that rather
than looking at climate change from a matter of human rights, Hindu philosophy prioritizes the idea that “all life has rights.”

The concept of *dharma*, or righteous action for the betterment of others, is a clarion call for climate activism. It speaks to who we are as living beings, and the interconnected nature of the planet and universe. The very essence of *dharma* is embodied in the ethos of climate activism, though rarely articulated in such terms.

Similarly, the concept of *Matre Bhumi*, which means Mother Earth, is central to many Hindu texts. It is based on the idea that all living beings are interconnected. And while Hindu philosophy emphasizes preserving *Matre Bhumi*, Hindus are often guilty of ignoring that premise. It’s a classic case of faith communities not practicing what their scriptures preach. But with greenhouse gas emissions increasing at faster rates than ever, the climate is reaching a point of irreparable damage, leading to widespread extinctions and population displacement. We are, as Hindu American Foundation communications director and climate activist Mat McDermott says, “at a strong inflection point in history.”
Climate Change Activism as Bhakti

A number of the climate activists at the conference said addressing climate change can be viewed from the lens of bhakti, or selfless devotion. Bhakti is one of the central tenets of Hindu devotion, the idea that all one needs to do is unconditionally love the divine in order to achieve enlightenment. Hindu theologian Chris Fici added that “love is the foundation of Hindu ethics.” This is profound at a time when Hindu religious institutions risk losing younger members because they consider them too ritualistic and too disconnected to practice. Some of the country’s largest temples, including the Hindu Temple Society of North America in Flushing, New York, and the Sri Siva Vishnu Temple in Lanham, Maryland, have invested resources in trying to promote “youth” activities, while Hindu orders such as the Chinmaya Mission and Arsha Vidya Gurukulam have developed programming for congregants from 5-18.

Despite those efforts, Hindu religious leaders have noted that the drop-off begins after Hindu Americans go to college. Younger climate activists who also happen to be Hindu frequently fail to make the connection between their activism and their religious identity. Some of that can be attributed to the idea that Hindu scriptures can often seem distant from praxis. But in viewing climate change activism as a form of Bhakti, the divine re-enters the picture.

This is probably welcome news for many young climate activists struggling to define their religious identity at a time when “spiritual not religious” or “nones” (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2015) have become more fashionable. For the Hindu climate change activists at the conference, reframing their activism as acts of love might also be a proactive way of advocating policies like the Green New Deal, a sweeping policy proposal that promotes renewable energy sources and a holistic approach to economic development that privileges ways to reduce the country’s carbon footprint.

Hindu philosophy emphasizes the idea of moderation, of not consuming more than one needs. That’s a point the climate activists at HEECA underscored when connecting the Green New Deal to Hinduism. Narayan Subramanian, an adviser to the Marshall Islands and one of the authors of key language added to the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, said it was of critical importance to understand Hindu philosophy as a means of understanding the interconnectedness of our planet’s ecosystem.

But is getting the Hindu community behind a specific policy proposal like the Green New Deal a good idea? Even though Hindus tend
to be more liberal than other faith communities (Zauzmer, 2016, March 10), there is still ideological diversity in the community, and the Green New Deal has been panned by Republicans and some Democrats.

In this case, it might not be about a specific proposal. Instead, it’s more about actually doing something. Varshini Prakash, one of the founders of the *Sunrise Movement*, a youth-led collective that is pushing to enact aggressive climate change policies, says Hindu Americans and others must hold elected officials accountable for their action (or lack thereof) on climate change. Prakash is one of the visionaries behind the Green New Deal and has worked with Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to ensure the platform is embraced as part of the Democrats’ policy agenda.

Perhaps the climate conference will inspire Hindus to work more actively to promote change in accordance to Hindu philosophy. It means no longer having to take a backseat to save the planet and ensuring a true interfaith solution to addressing climate change.

Moreover, gatherings like HEECA might become a template for Hindus and other religious groups to develop and share collective best practices in advocacy and communicating to their respective communities. That sort of collective action is needed - and fast. The earth doesn’t have much time for us to get our act together.

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**References**


Bridging the Gaps: Promising Practices at the Rochester Institute of Technology with Brennan Coon

By Amy J. Rio

Technology, intramurals, and spirituality. The convergence of these three areas seems unlikely, but in Brennan Coon’s case, the three aspects have flowed together quite naturally. Coon attended Hobart and William Smith Colleges, graduating in 2002, with the belief that he would be a high school social studies teacher. Sports were always an integral part of his life. He worked with the sports information department in college and was the lacrosse team manager. While sports were ever present, so too was the church. Coon’s faith journey mirrors so many others’ in today’s world, participating in various denominations while supporting friends’ journeys by attending bar and bat mitzvahs. Exercising spiritual muscles went hand in hand with physical exercise. After teaching high school for one year, Coon pursued his true vocational calling with intramurals at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where today he is the Assistant Director at the Center for Recreational Sports.

Like numerous other institutions, RIT has focused on a comprehensive understanding of wellness in an effort to work with the whole student. The Associate Vice-President of Wellness oversees wellness throughout the many layers on campus. Wellness teams are comprised of faculty, staff, and students. The teams focus on alcohol and other drugs, disease prevention, emotional health, financial health, physical health and nutrition, self-care, sex and healthy relationships, sexual violence and discrimination, spirituality, and sustainability. Various academic courses are offered in these areas, with students required to take two wellness classes for graduation. Classes incorporate traditional physical fitness, and health and life wellness options. Faculty and staff can participate in an employee wellness Learn more about RIT’s Wellness programs
program, “Better Me.” Local retirees even come to school to participate with wellness classes. Coon began to work with the Wellness Committee in 2013, and became co-chair in 2016.

Coon appreciates the focus that RIT has on wellness, and especially the aspect of spiritual wellness. He understands the traditional “tech” stereotype seems far removed from spiritual wellness. He states that students often fit a “funky nerdy vibe” that can actually connect very well with a spiritual understanding, stating that a program on “Spirituality and Star Wars” was quite popular a couple years previously. The Interfaith Center has been a focal point at RIT, offering a wide variety of programming and an open door, even if it is only for “tea and cookies.” Coon is proud of the fact that spiritual wellness on campus is for everyone, no matter what their belief system may be. Resources are offered for all, with a focus on helping students make the connections for their own spiritual journey.

RIT’s understanding of wellness, and especially spiritual wellness, gave Coon an excellent foundation for the Convergence training that took place in October 2018, hosted at RIT in the Interfaith Center. Convergence’s Principles Training is a one-day professional development opportunity, introducing participants to the complex but essential work of supporting religious, secular, and spiritual identities on their campuses. Monica Sanford, the Assistant Director for Spiritual and Religious Life, invited Coon to participate. She thought the training would be a good model for Coon to incorporate with his work with the Wellness Team, as well as on a personal level. After the completion of the training, Coon completely agrees with this assessment.

Coon’s goals for the training were to discover “…another way of thinking about how we can reach out to students and answer questions they have – fill in any gaps in what they are looking for from the Center for Religious Life.” During the training, he was able to think about what tools students brought to college in regards to their spiritual journeys, as well as what they were looking for in regards to a faith community or church home. “How can we bridge those gaps?” Coon asks. Students sometimes do not know where to go to find the answers to their questions, or sometimes are not even certain what the questions are. He wants to know how he can reach out and connect with these students, and help them find a supportive community for their spiritual journeys.

Coon found Convergence’s Four Pillars of Policy and Practice particularly helpful. The focus on building relationships, advocacy, infrastructure, and program and training helped him better organize his approach to spiritual wellness by looking at the work being done from different angles. Specific ideas were brainstormed. Coon was able to ask, “Where are the areas we have interactions with students in our daily job (like intramurals) so that we can start a conversation and give them resources?” Coon’s official job with recreational sports provides more openings than one might imagine in support of spiritual wellness, and the training enabled him to explore specific ways that can occur.

Coon said the biggest epiphany he gained during the training was the statement, “Can’t be everyone’s job without being someone’s job.” It is easy to expect that someone else will take the responsibility for supporting spiritual wellness, yet it truly takes numerous individuals reaching out to students and closing the gaps. No matter one’s job title, when staff work together, they can create a culture where spiritual wellness is best supported. Coon could easily see how technology, physical fitness, and spirituality connect and intersect.

What were the most important take-aways for Coon from his day of Convergence training? He wants to do all he can to help fill the “gap in expectations.” Students often arrive on campus and are challenged with discovering the resources to support their spiritual journeys. Coon was able to think of specific ways that he can individually help fill these gaps, as well as how the wellness team can better support this vital
connection. He believes it is even more important at a school like the Rochester Institute of Technology, since so many tech students oftentimes do not expect a spiritual focus at their university.

The Convergence training changed some of the ways Coon works and interacts on campus. He believes it most dramatically transformed how he engaged with students on a personal level, whether it is in the intramurals arena, student conduct support, or wellness support. The conversations with students, in both individual and group settings, have taken a different focus. He now thinks more specifically about how he talks with students and seeks to provide resources so that he can help “fill the gaps.”

Coon has noticed changes beyond the individual level as well. The Wellness Committee has been able to incorporate lessons from the training, primary the last Two Pillars, in concrete ways. They ask questions such as, “What do we have in place? What can we do with programming to improve this aspect of our work?” The committee acknowledges the great stress students endure and has revisioned and reshaped how it can be most effective in supporting students. Innovative ideas were not only envisioned during the training, but have continued to emerge during the subsequent months.

How has the Convergence training changed Coon’s goals, both individually and in his group work? As already acknowledged, Coon’s individual conversations with students, especially within the scope of intramurals, has been transformed with a new focus. He continually asks himself, “How can I better support our students, especially our student employees? How can I be a good resource for them?” He believes that sports are something that enables us to draw from our strength and to grow stronger in numerous ways beyond the physical. His focus is the goal of supporting students at a deeper level and not just the superficial ones. With student workers, Coon seeks to supervise in a manner that goes to the heart of student support. If a student worker is missing work, he seeks to move beyond the obvious consequences for not fulfilling work requirements and to uncover the deeper roots of a student who may be struggling.

Refocused goals are also important for the Spirituality Committee that Coon co-chairs. They are seeking concrete ways to discover how known the work truly is, especially at a school focused on tech. The committee is asking, “How visible are we? Do students come to us?” With such questions, they are examining the wellness program in its totality and looking for overall alignment with student wellness for the whole person. The goals for the group have not so much changed, as simply been refocused.

How would Coon describe the Convergence training to someone who has never heard of it? He states:
There is a converging of so many different backgrounds, experiences on campus. It does not end with someone’s spiritual experience. All the diversity of students come together, and what does that mean for them? How do they interact with each other? How do we best use our interactions as faculty and staff to help students be as effective as we can be?

Nora Bond, Director of Training and Facilitation with Convergence, adds:

In the training, we introduce and operationalize our theoretical framework for organizational change, the Four Pillars of Policy & Practice. Each one addresses a common challenge to supporting religious, secular, and spiritual identities on campuses, and we start there because we get it - even though it is vital to support these identities, it can be hard to know where to start and how to develop. In the training, we move participants from “But how?” to an actual strategic plan.

The specific details of programming within a strategic plan were particularly helpful to Coon and his team. He concludes,

[Convergence] was a really good training for us. We had some really good takeaways. It was really helpful to have two other colleges with us. We got to see how some other campuses in the area are handling these issues. The intentional collaboration was an unexpected benefit. It was a really worthwhile time, and I’m glad to have a chance to participate.

The work of spiritual wellness is truly one that bridges the gaps, both individually and communally. Brennan Coon is a fine example of someone taking his own life story and interests, listening for his own spiritual and vocational calling, and finding innovative ways to work with colleagues to support spiritual wellness on today’s campus.
Ninety-nine-year-old Abraham sits at the door of his nomadic tent in the hottest part of the day while recovering from his circumcision... having an epiphany. God had appeared to him in the sacred oak grove near Mamre. In the midst of this divine/human interaction, Abraham looks up and sees three travelers, perfect strangers, passing by. In a show of radical hospitality, he abruptly abandons the Creator of the Universe, and runs off (ouch) to effusively welcome these strangers into their home, to wash their feet and host them for a meal. Sarah prepares the meal while, according to our Sages, his beloved son Ishmael slaughters a calf especially for their guests.

Abraham shares the shade of a tree with these passersby; they speak of things of the spirit and the visitors bring Abraham and Sarah news of a miracle, a fulfillment of God’s promise.

So the story in the Torah goes.

In some of the stories of our ancient Sages, Abraham seeks to convert his guests from their polytheistic civilizations to the monotheism he was tasked with disseminating and many, we are told, embraced his view of a Creator of “heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them.” It is a one-way exchange, the host seeking to change the guest.

But this is a narrow understanding of what happens when you invite strangers into your home.

Sem Teitel, a Unitarian Universalist Minister and contributor to the new compilation One Nation, Indivisible: Seeking Liberty and Justice from the Pulpit to the Streets

By Eli Herb

BOOK REVIEW

One Nation, Indivisible: Seeking Liberty and Justice from the Pulpit to the Streets

By Eli Herb

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the Pulpit to the Streets (Wipf & Stock, 2019), examines how, in the Qur’anic telling, Abraham’s hospitality alters the host. In Muslim scripture, Abraham “conceived a fear of them [the guests].”

“Avraham,” Teitel writes, “welcomes the strangers into his home. But then, he immediately becomes afraid of the people that he has just let in and starts waffling, possibly regretting his decision.” (p. 63) No such ambivalence exists in the Hebrew bible, and the Qur’an’s telling gives us an image of an Abraham that is much more relatable. If you have ever invited perfect strangers into your home, you know that it can be frightening – even dangerous. Regardless, these meetings often change the course of one’s life.

In both sacred tellings, Teitel notes, the strangers deliver “life-changing news” – that the couple will be blessed with “biological children at [their] advanced age.” The strangers, it turns out, are angels in the guise of humans. In the Qur’an, they sense Abraham’s discomfort and assure him that he need not fear.

“We are in a position that is not so different from the position Abraham was in when he became afraid of strangers, not knowing that they brought him blessed news,” Teitel observes. From both versions, the Hebrew bible and the Qur’an, he concludes, “Our sacred texts tell us that we can look at strangers and travelers, visitors and refugees, people of all kinds, from all backgrounds, and know that among them we see messengers from God” (p. 64). The fear of the stranger will doubtless persist, but we are to act with hospitality, aspiring to see the divinity in the other.

Celene Ibrahim, the editor and curator of One Nation, Indivisible, has compiled a series of essays that demonstrate how meetings of strangers, and the hospitality they show each other, binds us together, forever changing the way we see not only the “other” but also ourselves. These essays by Muslims, Jews, and Christians show how their encounters with Islam and relationships with Muslims have profoundly changed their view of Muslims and their own faith.

Ibrahim, who is lovingly and respectfully called “Sister Celene” in the Muslim community of the Boston area, is herself an example of how the reciprocity of hospitality changes one forever. Having grown up in rural Pennsylvania, Ibrahim thirsted for understanding other peoples. This eventually led to studying abroad, including in Egypt, where she became a Muslim and met her husband. While she has become national leader in inter-religious work, known for her scholarship, humor, joy, and hope, her metamorphosis has not meant disconnecting with her roots. “And to be clear,” she writes in One Nation, Indivisible:
I still do live in a primarily rural area, which I adore, and I own a Dodge Ram pickup truck, which I proudly drive wearing a headscarf. You can take the girl out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the girl! (p. xli)

In one of her many light-hearted footnotes, she adds,

Don’t stop reading either, my dear environmentalist friends. We mostly drive an electric vehicle and buy organic foods with reusable bags from local farmers. If it is possible to survive on harvesting wild blueberries and sorrel, we are nearly in the category of homesteaders.

UC Santa Barbara Professor Jose Ignacio Cabezon—who at least at one point was the first and only Spanish speaking gay–Cuban–American–Tibetan–Buddhist—used to teach world religion classes at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. As a student of his, I remember him telling us something like this: “If you enter into an interfaith dialogue without the humility to acknowledge that this meeting may permanently change you—that it may lead you to convert—you are not really entering into interfaith dialogue.” This teaching emphasizes the reciprocal nature of meeting “the other.”

As a young Jewish woman, Miriam Israel went to Oman where she lived with a Muslim family. To her surprise, religion became what deeply connected her to her host family. “I’d assumed that religion had no place in our relationship, but our shared faith gave us a way to communicate. [As it turned out] religion was our common denominator… a simple point of connection—our shared sacred history—[became] the foundation of trust” (p. 42). From this, she learned “the vulnerability that is required to generate spaces that can feel like home.” Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality, she writes

... teaches us how a home can be defined by the people welcomed into it and the openness of its doors. Similarly, in a relationship across difference, we are both the stranger and the host; by being aware of both positions simultaneously, we can increase our capacity for empathy and even construct meaningful places to call home. (p. 43)

Inviting a stranger to share their truth with you changes both the guest and the stranger. Taymullah Abdur-Rahman, an African American Muslim, was profoundly altered by an invitation to speak at an Episcopal Church by a deacon who said, “My community needs to hear the truth from you.” Abdur-Rahman was shocked. “The truth from me? How could a Christian admit that I had any kind of truth?” (p. 4) His visit to St. Elizabeth’s Episcopal Church “planted an
unexpected seed of humility,” while the congregation was exposed to the truth from an African American Muslim.

Truth serves as the connection—perhaps especially when the truths are in apparent conflict. In the book’s essay “A Sign of Connection,” Nancy Fuchs Kreimer writes that her work with Muslims and Jews has shown that even “the issue of Israel/Palestine can become an occasion for connection rather than division” (p. 46). The vulnerability required to host each other’s truths, wherever they are as works-in-progress, becomes the vehicle for building trust and connection.

Story after wonderful story, teaching after unique teaching, One Nation, Indivisible demonstrates how the vulnerability of being a host or a guest in someone’s home, in someone’s life, can make a profound difference. This is precious medicine for our divided times. While One Nation, Indivisible focuses (thank God) on the stories of Muslims, Jews, and Christians and how they have been altered through interactions with the other, aspiring to dispel American myths and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, the spirit it brings is universal. Radical hospitality will be necessary to bring our country back together, to revive the values of our country expressed in the (original) text of our Pledge of Allegiance (…one nation, indivisible).

Writing this essay only a week after an open-door Jewish community in Poway, California was targeted by a White, Christian terrorist driven by ancient anti-Semitic stereotypes, I shudder at my own chutzpah in arguing for the kind of hospitality Abraham and Sarah showed. Only six months before, my people were attacked by another White nationalist terrorist in Pittsburgh precisely because of our community’s value of hospitality to strangers (i.e. refugees and immigrants). These two deadly attacks took place during a two-year period of escalating anti-Semitic acts. The Qur’an’s Abraham gives us some strength here: he, too, was frightened by the otherness of his guests. Yet his faithful act of vulnerability changed the entire world.

Sister Celene writes in the epilogue of One Nation, Indivisible that “the life of the spirit – whether it is within institutional contexts or at their fringes” (p. 188) is most important for forging ahead with radical hospitality. It is the life of the spirit that drives us to “transcend our baser tendencies by cultivating our capacities for generosity, empathy, and humility.” Faith can give us the courage, and the humility, to open the door and our hearts.

This book, then, is itself an act of radical hospitality.
Contributors

Murali Balaji
Murali Balaji, Ph.D., is a journalist, author, and academic with nearly 20 years of experience in diversity leadership. He is the founder of Maruthi Education Consulting and consults numerous organizations, including the University of Pennsylvania, on diversity and inclusion issues. Dr. Balaji has been recognized as a national leader in cultural competency and religious literacy.

Nora Bond
Nora Bond is the Director of Training and Facilitation with Convergence. She lives in Oakland, CA and also works as a certified spiritual director. She holds a BA from Mount Holyoke College in Psychology and an MA from Tufts University in Child Study & Human Development.
Amy Rio

Amy Rio is the Chaplain of Salem Academy and College in Winston Salem, NC. Prior to serving in this position, she worked as the United Methodist Campus Minister at the University of North Carolina in Asheville and as the Wesley Foundation/ELCA Director at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. An ordained United Methodist minister, Amy received a Masters of Divinity from Duke Divinity School, and a Doctor of Ministry with a focus on Spirituality and Story from Wesley Theological School. Amy is also a certified spiritual director. Amy’s writing has explored spiritual formation with college students in *To Transform the World: Vital United Methodist Campus Ministry*, interfaith work, Celtic Spirituality, and issues surrounding women and spirituality.

Jenny L. Small

Jenny L. Small is Managing Editor of *Convergence Magazine* and the Convergence Director of Communications. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and is the author of multiple articles and books about worldview diversity and meaning-making in higher education, including *Making Meaning: Embracing Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Life Purpose in Student Affairs*. Dr. Small is also an Associate Editor for the *Journal of College and Character*.

Eli Herb

Rabbi Eli Herb was ordained at Hebrew College in Boston and began his new life in Salem, Oregon as the full-time spiritual leader of Temple Beth Sholom in July, 2016. Born and raised in Carbondale, Colorado, he studied Music Composition at the Santa Fe University of Art and Design and Theological Studies at the University of Denver. In 2010, Eli received ordination as a Maggid, a Jewish Spiritual Storyteller and the following year began rabbinical school.
Call for Submissions

CONVERGENCE MAGAZINE WILL FOCUS ON TWO AREAS OF CONVERGENCE:

1) the convergence between religious, secular, and spiritual identities on college campuses, and
2) the convergence between administrators and faculty members in all levels of higher education and religious, secular, and spiritual life professionals (including those in campus ministry positions). The magazine’s objective is to promote harmonious campus communities and the fostering of responsible global citizens through spreading understanding among those who espouse a wide range of identities and worldviews.

The target audience for Convergence Magazine is professionals, students, and scholars located on college campuses in the areas served through the publication’s content. In addition, the magazine is aimed to those working in related fields beyond campus borders, such as in religious organizations, schools of theology, and houses of worship, and in non-profits and educational service organizations serving the field of higher education student affairs.

Convergence Magazine is published online on a tri-annual basis and acts as one of the pillars of the Convergence organization, others of which include training professionals, consultation with universities, organizational systems and collaborations, and additional content (blog, podcast, webinars, and conferences).

The editors of Convergence Magazine solicit contributions in the following categories:

**Promising Practices**
Practitioners from all divisions, particularly those employed in the target convergence areas, are invited to tell the stories of the successful convergences on their college campuses. (Word count: between 3,000 and 4,000 words)

**Administration and Policy**
Administrators and other professionals are invited to describe the higher-order administrative practices and implemented policies that have led to successful convergences on their college campuses. (Word count: between 3,000 and 4,000 words)

**Opinion**
All higher education professionals are invited to share their opinions on steps that can be taken within our shared field to promote the two categories of convergence. (Word count: between 2,000 and 3,000 words)
Book Reviews
All higher education professionals are invited to share a review of a new or recent book publication on a related topic, such as interfaith dialogue, worldview development, or chaplaincy work. (Word count: between 1,000 and 1,500 words)

Spotlight Programs
All higher education professionals are invited to share brief information about a promising program on their own campus that meets Convergence Magazine’s goals of promoting harmonious campus communities and the fostering of responsible global citizens. The format for this category is question and response, differing from the feature-style writing in the Promising Practices category.

In addition to on-the-ground practitioners and administrators, the editors invite faculty and graduate students to submit articles in the above categories. However, the focus should remain on concrete strategies and ideas for practical implementation.

Convergence Magazine is not a research journal. The tone of the magazine will be forthright and conversational, rather than research-intensive. However, as the editors strongly believe that all promising practices, policies, and opinions are undergirded by high-quality research, we expect that cited references to supporting literature will be included in all published pieces. Please utilize the APA 6th edition for formatting these references.

Call for Submissions
Submissions for each tri-annual issue will be due two months prior to the publication month, on the 15th of the month. For example, upcoming submission deadlines will be:

March 15, 2019 for publication in May 2019
July 15, 2019 for publication in September 2019

Any submission that misses a deadline will automatically be considered for the following issue.

Note: Submissions to Convergence Magazine do not need to be blinded. Because the editors are seeking stories based on real-world experiences, details about specific campuses and programs are necessary and should not be anonymized. Authors should think carefully about whether this is appropriate for the articles they are submitting.

Because Convergence Magazine is an online publication, authors are invited to submit full-color photos to accompany their pieces.

To be considered for publication in any of the first four categories listed above, upload your document and photos at the following website: http://bit.ly/2gbZUEC.

To be considered for publication in the Spotlight Programs category, complete the following online form: https://convergenceoncampus.wufoo.com/forms/m16e590j0ivlq8v/

Questions can be directed to Dr. Jenny Small, Convergence Communication Director: jenny.small@convergenceoncampus.org.

More information about the Convergence organization can be found here.
What We’re Talking About
What’s Being Talked about on the Convergence Blog

ASHA SIMPSON: CONNECTING HINDUISM WITH ENVIRONMENTALISM

NORA BOND: THE OTHER SIDE OF HOSPITALITY: HOW TO BE A GOOD GUEST

MICAH NORMAN–PACE: LIFTING EACH OTHER UP