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Introduction: Returning to Hope

By J.T. Snipes

As the new school year begins, I often find myself in a liminal space between mourning and hope, mourning the end of the summer and all that it entails. I mourn all of the projects left undone. I mourn the end of seasonal fireworks and backyard cookouts. Most importantly, I mourn the lost opportunities to (re)connect and spend time with friends, family, and even myself. However in the midst of mourning the loss of summer, I am also imbued with a sense of hope that accompanies the start of each new academic year. It is a hope that students will return to school refreshed, ready, and excited to engage new academic and social experiences this year. A hope that I will be a better scholar, educator, and community member. A hope and promise that campus will be a more welcoming and inclusive space to all students, not just those with social capital. This last hope of campuses being spaces of respite, reclamation, and restoration for marginalized communities is a possibility that can made real by the stories featured in this back to school issue of Convergence Magazine.

The first story in this issue addresses a returning of sorts, as Amy Richards explores the intricacies of religious identity and relationship building. In a compelling narrative, she shares insights and her experiences choosing (not) to wear a hijab as a career coach at the University of Toronto. Her story invites campus educators to grapple with the implications of making faith visible. Her essay dutifully notes the ways in which wearing a hijab impacted relationships within the multiple communities to which she belonged, drawing some students closer and while repelling others. It is also a narrative that invites educators to reflect on the privilege and marginalization that each individual carries in both religious and secular spaces. Finally, the piece encourages us to break our virtual, collective silence about religion and to engage in open and honest dialogue about our (non)religious beliefs and expressions.

In the second article, Jessica Joslin pushes us to consider the religious implications of campus politics. Her piece adeptly chronicles the experiences of Muslim and Palestinian students on college campuses as they navigate the religious and political implications of Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) movements on their campus. Her piece challenges campus educators to think more complexly about religion and politics, and encourages them to consider the potential cost of (in)action when it comes to diversity and inclusion efforts on college campuses.
Following Joslin’s article, Gordon Maples provides an insightful review of Adam Laats’s new book *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education*. The issue ends by exploring an innovative campus program led by Alisha Strange called Qu(e)erying Religion. This program centers the religious and spiritual identities of LGBTQ students and provide practical means of engaging marginalized populations at the critical intersections of religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

As always here at *Convergence Magazine*, our editorial board welcomes you to share your reactions to any of the pieces on our Facebook page. We hope that you see the stories featured in this issue as a launching point for engaging in critical work related to religious and spiritual engagement on campus. 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.

As you welcome back the new academic year, I hope you enjoy this issue and that it opens a space of imaginative hope where we can collectively dream and create new campuses and better worlds for ourselves and our students.
Convergence Magazine

(Unintentional) Islamic Career Coaching at the University of Toronto

By Amy Richards

The most nerve-wracking day of my career is not something you would expect. There was no risk to my personal safety, or anyone else’s, and I wasn’t about to be fired. There wasn’t even any public speaking involved. Nevertheless, it felt intensely uncomfortable because I was about to take a very controversial step in my life. I was about to open myself up to judgement and change how I was viewed by everyone around me: I had decided to start wearing hijab.

As a Career Coach at the University of Toronto, the transition I faced was likely easier than many hijabis might experience in the North American employment market (Robinson, 2016). Holding a unionized position at an academic institution where diversity is encouraged and welcomed, I faced no risk to my employment. But no equity or diversity policies could protect me from the feelings and opinions of those with whom I interacted. We are all guilty of judgement, all day long, no matter our attempts to stay open minded. We are, after all, only human.

Islam encourages its adherents to fear only God (Qur’an 2:41), and this is something to which I aspire, but often, it’s not easy. How many of us announce our religion to all who see us? In my place of employment at the time, no one wore hijab but me. To add to my peculiarity, my colleagues and the students I supported had no reference point for my decision. I didn’t have a Muslim name and I was not born Muslim. Those who weren’t a fan of my new appearance couldn’t “blame” my parents and I had no Muslim husband or fiancé. My decision to practice Islam was mine alone. No one was “at fault” but me.

Reports of Muslim converts flocking to join ISIS were common at the time (Perešin, 2015), and I worried how negatively my religious identity might be perceived. Would others still consider me intelligent? Capable? Would men be offended if I followed a common hijabi practice and chose not to shake their hands? Would onlookers? Would I no longer be taken seriously? Would I be written off, considered crazy? My mind was filled with fear. Having enjoyed the ease that comes with being white in North America for my entire life, I was suddenly a minority. Even my female gender hadn’t posed a challenge in my career. Female leaders are common at the University of Toronto, and I had never personally experienced the glass
ceiling. To that point in my life, I don’t think I realized the privilege that comes with being able to blend in. Abruptly, I was noticeable in a way that felt very different for me.

The first day I walked into my workplace with a scarf on my head, I dressed impeccably for the occasion. My shirt matched so perfectly with the purple flowers on my scarf that I was a little embarrassed others might wonder how long I spent shopping for such a close colour match. I wanted to continue to fit in, and spent way too much time coordinating outfits that were fashionable while still falling within Islamic parameters. The first colleague I encountered stopped in her tracks and just stared at me for a few seconds. Then, recovering, she said, “Amy. How are you today?” We made awkward conversation while I waited in line for my morning coffee, before I walked briskly to my office and closed the door. Sitting down, I breathed a sigh of relief. I wondered, “Do I even need to leave my office today?” Turning on my computer, I checked my calendar and was grateful to see it was a rare day without student coaching sessions. But I could only hide in my office for so long. Eventually I had to interact with the world.

In the days that followed I experienced many encounters similar to the awkward “Amy. How are you?” encounter. It was a profound experience to carry the elephant in the room on my head and have so few people acknowledge it. I didn’t blame them, but the experience made me contemplate why we feel so forbidden to talk about religion. Born and raised in North America, I was well indoctrinated with the rule that states discussing religion is inappropriate. Until I converted, however, this societal norm had never deeply affected me. Frustratingly, it seems the greatest supporters of this rule tend to be members of the majority. They aren’t the ones who look different, requiring accommodation for prayers or days off to observe a religious holiday. There is no conversation required for them; they are accommodated. It’s easy for them to make this rule.

One evening, shortly after I began practicing Islam, I found myself fielding questions on the religion during dinner with my non-Muslim family. A distant relative expressed her feeling that religion should be kept private. If I needed to pray, she thought I should excuse myself and avoid telling others what I was going to do. I explained that advising others wasn’t a problem for me. She then said, “But it’s a little like announcing ‘Excuse me, I need to go take a dump.’” Shockingly, those present for our conversation snickered and nodded their heads in agreement. My religion was viewed as something I should be embarrassed by; prayer was equated with the act of “taking a dump.” She meant for her comment to be humorous, and I’m certain she was unaware of the potential for hurt. There was no understanding that silencing my religious identity is the same as saying, “Your true self is not welcome here.” Her comfort required my discomfort.
Personally, I welcomed people asking about my faith and religious practices. Those who did made me feel so much more relaxed in my new attire. When people addressed it, I felt less judged. The colleagues I work with on a daily basis were amazingly supportive. My boss took me for coffee, and we discussed Islam for over an hour. Her interest was genuine; she really cared. Another colleague asked to attend a Friday prayer on campus with me because she had always wondered what it was like. Others complimented my scarves so regularly that their intent to make me feel at ease was clear. But colleagues in less close working relationships with me, keeping with societal norms, did not address my new appearance. I understand their lack of acknowledgement, but to this day, I wonder if my hijab changed their opinion of me.

With our Muslim students, however, something amazing began to happen. From across the program I support, they sought out my office hours, and I took on the role of informal Islamic Career Coach. These students wanted to discuss their career decisions in the context of their Islamic faith. Having spent years reading about the religion and attending courses prior to converting, I felt confident handling the conversations, but I really didn’t need much more than the major tenets of the faith. Students tended to possess the knowledge required, and from me, they just needed a space where they felt they could be their true selves. The University of Toronto has a wonderful Muslim Chaplain on campus to support students, but I doubt he’d want to compete with me in a resume writing competition. I felt I was filling a void. My interactions with these students became a really enjoyable part of my work, and I felt blessed to be able to create a space where they felt at ease discussing what was closest to their hearts. This does not mean I didn’t enjoy interactions with others, but the sharing of a faith connection can lead to such an impactful dialogue.

Sometimes, conversations even veered outside of career-related topics: from encouraging a student to request accommodation to celebrate Eid to learning a student was praying in the stairwell and strategizing other options (the building now has a room reserved for prayer and other spiritual practices). Students often shared that while their faith was the most important thing in their life, completely defining their worldview, it was something they rarely felt comfortable bringing up at school. Given the importance of finding a career that is in line with one’s values, I found these comments really concerning.

For the first couple of weeks as a hijabi, I was preoccupied. But time passed, and eventually I felt at ease enough to stop ruminating about my new appearance and focus more intently on the students in front of me. I began to contemplate how the display of my religious identity might affect my work with other student groups. It was common for me to greet students for appointments and notice their eyes dart from my eyes to just a little to the right or left. I began to call it the “hijab-digestion-eye-dart.” For those seeing me for the first time in a headscarf, I would give them a big smile and say, “Hello, I know I look a little different today, but it’s still the same me.” Usually, and understandably, there would be no response at all to this, other than the hijab-digestion-eye-dart.

I became concerned about students from other societal groups and worried if they would still be comfortable with me. In particular, I was concerned about how my LGBTQ students would feel if they assumed I held mainstream Islamic views on the subject of homosexuality. Students who were out still sometimes disclosed to me, but what about others less comfortable discussing this part of their identity? Students have often said to me that their sexual orientation is an important factor when making employment decisions, and I worried that these students might no longer be as willing to address this subject with me. It’s

For an introduction to mainstream and minority Islamic perspectives on LGBTQ individuals, see Akyol 2015, Alipour 2017, and Jahangir & Abdul-latif 2016.
my job to make students feel at ease, and my new appearance was now part of the dynamic in the room.

Wearing hijab provided me with a profound opportunity to contemplate my societal position in a deeper way. Holding a student advising role on a multicultural campus, I’m proud to be a member of a professional team that is sensitive to differences. Our exposure to diversity alone has to be worth something. But as career coaches, do we pride ourselves too much in our ability to bridge the religious, cultural, and other gaps we encounter daily? My experience provided a blunt lesson of how the display of one’s religion can dramatically impact what another will disclose. Having worked in the career management field for over ten years, I now worry that we assume students are comfortable discussing whatever is most important to them in appointments. My personal experience suggests that this is not true.

When the topic of religion does come up in a career counseling session, it’s usually when students list their involvement with their religious community on their resumes. Originally, I was trained in the old-fashioned approach that states religious affiliation should not be mentioned on a resume. I’ve found a better, more updated approach is to ask about potential trade-offs and the relevance of listing this information. In my experience, those who include it are quite set on having it there. In that case, my job is to check their grammar.

After three years, for an array of reasons, I decided to stop wearing hijab (that’s another article … or book). Taking it off, the Islamic career discussions greatly reduced. My prayer mat is still visible in my office, and sometimes students will ask about it, but my ability to connect with Muslim students changed. Muslims who might be deemed more religiously “conservative” no longer bring up the topic of religion as often or as extensively. More “liberal” Muslims now discuss their faith with me in greater detail, presumably because I’m viewed to be more like them. With non-Muslims, it’s business as usual with the topic of religion seemingly off-limits.

I wish we all had the courage to deal with the topic of faith, even when our comfort is at risk. As a member of a minority religion, having fielded all sorts of questions on Islam over the years, I can confidently say the risk of offending me and all of the religious people I know, when our religion is addressed, isn’t large. Addressing faith opens up the possibility for more meaningful interactions. During my graduate studies in Social Justice Education, I was well instructed in the pitfalls of stereotyping, but operating too safely in conversations is not a good approach either. Asking your student named Mohammad if he’s celebrating Eid is not offensive. In fact, if Mohammad smiles and says, “No, my family immigrated years ago and we’re more partial
to Christmas these days!” you’ve just created a chance to forge a deeper connection. More likely, he will respond, “Yes, I’m looking forward to the food!” and you can then wish him a blessed Eid. Either way, you and Mohammad now know each other a little better.

I share this personal experience because it provided an unusual opportunity to assess how the public display of my religion changed how students interacted with me. We’ll never be able to connect perfectly with all people, but my experience provided a reminder of the importance of staying mindful of one’s position in relation to another. We won’t always share the same spiritual view with those around us, but it is possible to ask direct questions to get to know others better. As advisors in higher education, we tend to work only with what a student brings into the room. I challenge the belief that we shouldn’t bring the topic of religion up first. What’s the worst that could happen?

References


A Case for Broadening Campus Diversity Efforts to Include Religion and Spirituality

By Jessica Joslin

Most colleges say they are dedicated to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in some form. Colleges overwhelmingly articulate a commitment to diversity in their mission statements (Morphew & Hartley, 2006), and both of the major U.S. student affairs professional organizations, ACPA and NASPA, list valuing and promoting diversity among their top commitments (ACPA, 2015; NASPA, 2015). However, religious and spiritual diversity remains on the sidelines of diversity conversations on many secular campuses. Actively supporting religious and spiritual diversity on a secular campus appears counter to the secular commitment of many universities and complicates their purported religious neutrality.

Yet, large numbers of religious and spiritual students call secular campuses home, and religion and spirituality play a particularly crucial role in the lives of students who are often marginalized on college campuses. Women and people of color tend to be more religious than their white and male counterparts (Bryant, 2007; Jones et al., 2010; Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun & Navarro-Rivera, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2016); thus how universities engage with religion and spirituality disproportionally impacts these students. Studies have consistently shown that women of color use their faith as a tool to cope with adversity (Mattis, 2003; Musgrave, Allen, & Allen, 2002). Simply ignoring or dismissing the experiences of religious and spiritual students at best risks missing an opportunity to engage with students in conversations about race and identity, and at worst risks alienating some of the very students its diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts seek to reach and support.

This aversion to engaging with religion and spirituality is not new. Despite an early investment in faith-based education, an increasing divide between religion and academic study has marked the last two hundred years of the history of higher education in the U.S. Many of the nation’s colleges were founded with the charge to
educate students in ways that supported and grew their Christian faith (Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996; Sloan, 1994). Scholars disagree on exactly when colleges became more reticent to allow the Bible to influence their classrooms and activities; however, most say it was around the mid- to late-1800s (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Marsden, 1994; Reuben, 1996; Sloan, 1994). Around this time, a number of factors encouraged the idea that faith and reason belonged together as much as oil and water. It was believed that religious faith had emotional and moral value, but was at its core anti-intellectual (Reuben, 1996).

Due in part to this history and weariness towards engaging with religion in the academy, there is a great deal of fear and hesitation towards acknowledging and engaging with students’ religious and spiritual lives. However, in my own research on religious diversity on college campuses (Joslin, 2019), I observed a few places where universities cannot help but bump up against the religious and spiritual identities of students in significant ways that highlight the inseparable relationship between religion and other aspects of identity. These areas have led to significant anxiety among many administrators and faculty regarding how universities engage with the religious and spiritual identities of their students.

The ongoing debate on college campuses regarding the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, which advocates that universities cease support and engagement with Israel in protest of the Israeli government’s treatment of Palestine, highlights the limits of avoiding engaging with students’ religious and spiritual identities. While I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, I watched this concern play out on campus in a number of ways. Every year between 2014 and 2017, a student group called Michigan for a Free Palestine (MFP, a pseudonym) brought legislation to the Michigan student government that asked the student government to formally request that the University consider divesting from investments in Israel. The campus paper, The Michigan Daily, described the specifics of group’s request this way, “The divestment movement calls for the University’s Board of Regents to create a committee to investigate three companies operating in Israel and involved in alleged human rights violations against Palestinians” (Baker, Lacroix, & Cheeti, 2017).

Each year since 2014, MFPs efforts to support this bill garnered significant attention from the student body and campus press. In response to a 2014 vote by student government leaders to indefinitely postpone a vote on MFP’s measure, MFP students and allies staged a sit-in that included more than 100 students, alumni, and community members to demand that the student government hold a vote (Adamczyk, 2014; Lacroix & Baker, 2017). Each year thereafter the MFP continued to present their bill to the student government, which was eventually passed in the fall of 2017. Students argued passionately for and against the bill’s passage (Adamczyk, 2014; Baker, Lacroix, & Cheeti, 2017; Lacroix & Cheeti, 2017). These debates exposed some deep and uncomfortable fissures within the student body, as well as between the many members of the student body and the administration. After MFP’s bill was passed, the University of Michigan Board of Regents declined the student government’s request that they form a committee to investigate divestment (Slagter, 2017). There had been previous evidence to suggest that the Regents were uninterested in reconsidering the University’s relationship with Israel, financial or otherwise. Six of the eight members of the Board of Regents had signed a joint statement indicating that they adamantly objected to any action that resulted in the boycott, divestment, or sanction of Israel (Slagter, 2017).

As a part of my own research, I interviewed a number of Muslim students, many of whom were involved in MFP. These interviews took place in the fall 2016 term, coinciding with the conclusion of MFP’s third failed attempt to pass a resolution with the student government. Omaria (all of the names included are pseudonyms), one of the Muslim students I spoke with, was a leader in the MFP movement, and shared her opinion that these annual debates were often very hurtful to her and many of her Palestinian and Muslim
peers. Aware of some of the treatment that she and MFP peers and allies received, she concluded that though being a Muslim on campus is difficult, “being Palestinian on this campus is a lot worse than being Muslim.” Omaria explained her frustration with being accused of being anti-Semitic because of her opposition to many of the efforts of the Israeli government:

Hold up! We are not attacking the Jewish religion, we’re attacking oppression and the government. It was really [about the Israeli] government, it was really about that. There was no correlation [between the protest and our feelings about the Jewish faith] and they can’t say we’re anti-Semitic.

For Omaria, her Palestinian and Muslim identities were deeply interconnected, and the pain from these intense campus conversations touched all parts of herself.

These divestment efforts were not substantially addressed in the interviews I did with students who were involved in a Modern Orthodox Jewish student group at Michigan. I conducted those interviews toward the end of the winter 2017 term, months after the discussion surrounding MFP’s bill had faded on campus. A *Michigan Daily* article after the passage of MFP’s 2017 resolution quoted a member of Hillel (a large international Jewish organization present on many of the nation’s campuses) who opposed the resolution. The quote captures some of the hurt felt by many Jewish students each time this bill was brought to a vote:

I worry that because [student government] leaders were unable to see the subtle yet crucial forms of anti-Semitism lying in this resolution and the broader BDS movement it represents, people will feel emboldened to let these types of subtle anti-Semitic comments run rampant …We have so much work to do to address hate in all forms, and I hope we can work toward doing this in a way that does not cast any group aside. (Baker, 2017)

For this Jewish student, the conversation around divestment on campus was difficult not just because it involved discussions of Israel, but, in her view, many of the conversations surrounding the bill exposed the anti-Semitism that was present on campus.

It is understandable that the very sensitive and deeply personal feelings surrounding students’ very real concerns regarding Israel and Palestine would cause anxiety for university officials. These debates are times when the interconnected and inseparable relationships among religion, race, and ethnicity are made acutely visible. As Omaria indicated, her experience of being a Palestinian and being a Muslim were deeply
intertwined, and both shaped her feelings of exclusion on campus. Similarly, for the Jewish student interviewed, this debate was both about Israel and about Jewish students’ experience of anti-Semitism.

The students’ experience of the tensions surrounding the relationship between Israel and Palestine highlight the farce of efforts to support marginalized students and engage with student diversity, while also trying to avoid engaging with students’ religious and spiritual identities. As decades of research on intersectionality have shown, there is simply no part of a student that is just their race, religion, ethnicity, or gender, for example; instead, all of these aspects of identity are interconnected and shape every aspect of how students interact with others and experience the world. Put another way, for students who identify with a religious tradition, it is impossible to engage with their race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality – indeed any aspect of their identity – without also shaping their experiences of their religious identity.

Tensions surrounding the BDS movement are just one example of where universities must cope with the ways that students’ religious and spiritual identities are interconnected with other aspects of the self. So, if they are truly interested in doing more than just espousing a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, than they must engage with the religious and spiritual lives of the students who call their campuses home. I do not claim to have the one-size-fits-all answer as to how campuses should help students talk about the painful and personal histories and political realities that shape life in Israel and Palestine, for example, but I do know that avoidance is not a solution.

Religion and spirituality are critically important to many students and should be seen as a fundamental part of the diversity of higher education. By ignoring the religious identities and beliefs of many of their students, campuses like Michigan are missing opportunities to deepen their stated commitment to diversity and inclusion. Many of the students I spoke with in my own work named instances when they felt tokenized for their religious beliefs by peers and faculty. Positive experiences discussing religion in classes were seen as outliers. Faculty and graduate student instructors often appeared to lack the training or desire necessary to treat students’ religious beliefs and identities thoughtfully and with respect. Sadly, it is also true that many faculty and graduate instructors did not seem to know how to effectively create inclusive classroom environments.

One of the students in my research described the importance of her faith in her life in a way that has remained with me. She stated, “[My faith] means a lot, because it’s who I am … I think it’s important and it’s vital to my life and livelihood.” Colleges and universities should understand that religion is indeed vital to the lives of many students – and data show this is especially true for women and people of color.

Wrestling with religion and spirituality, religious and spiritual beliefs and religious and spiritual students on campus can be disruptive to the norms that guide much of campus life on secular institutions. It requires that we challenge the notion that faith is the opposite of reason, which has pervaded American universities for many decades (Marsden, 1994; Sloan, 1994). It demands that instructors learn how to engage thoughtfully with religion in the classroom along with other aspects of identity. Campuses must invest in the spaces and resources needed for students to be able to worship and gather as they need, like prayer and reflection rooms, and halal and kosher food. Administrators must take a critical look at the academic calendar and campus events and ask who they include and exclude. Every effort must be taken to weed out Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and other forms of discrimination. Not considering religion and spirituality, ignoring it or pushing it to the sidelines, means dismissing something that is “vital to [the] life and livelihood” of so many students.
References


It is not uncommon to hear from pluralism-minded religious, secular, and spiritual life professionals at higher education institutions about their struggles to engage with evangelical and fundamentalist Christian students (Singer, 2018). Frequently cited as engagement complications are evangelicals’ reticence at the perceived endorsing of theological pluralism through interfaith participation, as well as the logistical issue of proselytization in multi-faith spaces (Hacker, n.d.; Interfaith Youth Core, 2011). While there is a case to be made that younger evangelicals are more positive in their views towards other worldviews and interreligious understanding than their elders, there is much history to this faith identity group within the context of higher education that can help administrators understand some of the cultural tensions that still exist today and continue to impact our work (Crandall et al., 2016; Diamant & Alper, 2017).

Dr. Adam Laats, with his 2018 book *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education*, on its face, provides a history of fundamentalist and conservative evangelical higher education through an analysis of six paragon institutions – Wheaton College, Moody Bible Institute, Bob Jones University, Liberty University, Biola University, and Gordon College – as they grew, shifted, and morphed over decades. However, the book is also more than that: it is an exercise in faith-conscious positionality on the part of Laats – an admitted outsider in these spaces who goes to great lengths to provide a balance of rigorous accuracy and sympathy (Turpin, 2018). It is also a sort of psychological exploration, delving into tensions between fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals, changing political and social pressures for evangelical college administrators and faculty over the years, and the struggles of these colleges to remain “loyal to an ill-defined evangelical purity” while simultaneously meeting the secular “standards of academic excellence” (Laats, 2018, p. 8). Laats’s book is as much about understanding evangelicals and fundamentalists as it is about understanding their higher education institutions. In this way, it can be seen as a valuable tool for spiritual life professionals.
If we want to understand either fundamentalism or higher education, we need to see that they have always been in a state of awkward tension ... [T]here's a scramble to figure out how to remain true to evangelical belief and true to the demands of higher education, even as the definitions of both kept changing. (Laats, 2018, p. 278)

It is notable that Laats does not flinch from addressing major social issues that have become strongly associated with evangelicalism and its higher education institutions over the years in the zeitgeist – racist, homophobic, and anti-science school policies among them (Laats, 2018, pp. 79, 118, 237). In the increasingly progressive and social justice minded “woke academy” (Watson, 2018), it is crucially important to not consciously dodge accurately-depicted controversial and contentious beliefs. For spiritual life practitioners, there is a lesson to pull from this example – dialogue across differences shouldn’t rely on pretending that differences are trivial or non-existent. Instead, differences need to be acknowledged and discussed, even if it can be uncomfortable to do so. If your interfaith dialogue activities are never slightly uncomfortable, there likely isn’t growth happening.

Also of interest to religious, secular, and spiritual life practitioners is Dr. Laats’s discussion of the controversy of labels within fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Though he uses the aforementioned terms frequently, he acknowledges that these labels are “tricky and turbulent” and a source of frequent debate and controversy within their in-group, not unlike political terms such as “progressive” or “democratic” (Laats, 2018, p. 5). This difficulty of finding ideal labels or terminology for this semi-discrete faith group is not unlike similar struggles with non-inclusive terms for religious, secular, and spiritual identity work (Lindsay, 2011; Maples, 2018a; Niose, 2013). It is also reminiscent of complaints surrounding umbrella terms like “nones” and “other,” which are
similarly vague and lack descriptive power (Armstrong, 2017; Maples, 2018a, 2018b). Practitioners can take
from this book cause for further consideration of the labels they choose when messaging and marketing
themselves to diverse students. It is possible that evangelical/fundamentalist students aren’t participating
in activities partially because they don’t feel invited to the space, similar to the concerns of some secular
and atheist students (Maples, 2018a).

Fundamentalist U is an intriguing, insightful, and engaging history, but is perhaps more fascinating as an
interfaith-conscious exercise in understanding the evangelical/fundamentalist perspective in the setting
of higher education. For non-evangelical practitioners of religious, secular, and spiritual life work within
colleges, this could be a valuable tool for looking at their work from a new perspective with historical
context. Even for evangelicals, there is almost certainly much to learn from Laats’s adept storytelling about
the political history of fundamentalism, the history of American higher education, and the select higher
education institutions he chooses to spotlight in great detail. It is a history that has not been told in this
way before, and merits the attention of curious eyes.

References
The Qu(e)erying Religion Programs

Program By Alisha Stranges
Location of Program: University of Toronto

What was your role during the program?

I served as the student intern and program facilitator from 2016 to 2018. This involved planning and facilitating an annual series of bi-weekly drop-in sessions that incorporated relationship building exercises, therapeutic crafting activities, and a curated group discussion around a revolving roster of community proposed topics, such as race and colourism, sex and passion, and conceptions of home.

The most noteworthy achievement is perhaps the creation of a digital space called the “anti-Archive” that preserves QR’s mission and history through memory. I call it an *anti* Archive because so much of what happens in a space like QR is undocumentable. The substance of QR is not so much what we do but rather what happens in the invisible spaces — the silences in between words, the energy in between bodies, the collectivized emotion shared.

But, how do you document the undocumentable?

Ultimately, I chose to interview about 20 different people who have been part of QR in various capacities since its inception in 2005. Over the course of three summers, I captured then edited these hour-long interviews into short narratives that provide a soundtrack for a visual story, brought to life through whiteboard animation. And now, this collection of animated, video archives lives on QR’s website, each one testifying to the individual and collective lived experience of being involved in QR’s programming. (visit https://queeryingreligion.weebly.com/anti-archive.html)

Other responsibilities and achievements include:

Organizing group outings to relevant queer cultural events that expanded student engagement with discussion themes beyond the bounds of campus life.
Co-organizing a multi-faith panel discussion with international and domestic religious leaders that focused on how the intersection of religion and queer identity is lived out in different contexts, including Cuba, South Korea, Kenya, and Canada.

Cultivating relationships with allied, faith-based and/or LGBTQ+ campus organizations to build community partnerships and increase the program's visibility.

Designing and disseminating promotional materials to advertise events both to the student body and to the wider community.

Designing and launching an official website that provides access to current information about the program its genealogy, and its schedule of events.

Establishing and maintaining a QR-specific listserv to sustain communication with interested participants.

Please provide a program description. Include any relevant details, including title, what motivated starting this program, who sponsors it, and what kind of pre-planning/maintenance it requires.

The Qu(e)erying Religion Program (QR) is a co-curricular campus initiative overseen by the Ecumenical Chaplaincy at the University of Toronto (ECUT).

ECUT first launched QR in 2005 as a way to foster open spaces for LGBTQ+ students of faith as they navigate the rich, sometimes troubling, and often sacred intersections of sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, race, and culture. Since 2005, hundreds of students have participated in QR’s process and discussion groups, panels, and cultural events at the nexus of these intersections.

A word from QR’s founder, Rev. Ralph Carl Wushke:

“In 2004, when I became Ecumenical Chaplain at U of T, having just completed a Th. M. in Queer theology, I was aware that there were a number of LGBTQ students in the colleges of the Toronto School of Theology, and having a deep interest in the intersection of queerness and faith, I thought there must be more students, staff and faculty at U of T who would be interested in this nexus. In January 2005 I invited some LGBTQ students together to a planning session. We established some goals for a program we named “Qu(e)erying Religion’ and launched the first four-part series at Hart House in February, 2005.”

What is the program agenda? Please include set up/break down, the flow of programming, and any common pitfalls to keep it going smoothly.

Each academic year, ECUT staff and a QR intern from the Multi-Faith Centre develop and facilitate a regular schedule of events that attend to the community’s current needs and interests.

The programming of events changes from year to year. However, a typical discussion group event involves collaborating with participants to arrive at an interesting discussion topic; booking a room and ordering refreshments through the Multi-Faith Centre; crafting and disseminating promotional materials (posters, Facebook event, website copy, email notifications to various listservs); arranging the meeting room with tables and chairs; welcoming participants and guiding them through an engaged discussion.

for inspiring stories of faith and spirituality from queer and trans alumni, visit the anti-Archive

queeryingreligion.weebly.com/anti-archive

DONATE HERE
canadahelps.org/en/charities/the-ecumenical-chaplaincy-at-the-university-of-toronto/

Antiarchive Postcard(Back)
QR privileges a very specific intersection that often gets overlooked, namely, religion and sexuality, and the program typically attracts a multi-faith, multi-racial, inter-cultural, and highly sensitive group of participants with divergent sexual and gender identities. Despite QR’s advertisement as a process and discussion group, the extreme diversity of the participant base often produces multiple barriers to speech that results in a hesitance toward verbalizing one’s experience.

In the context of QR, my primary goals were to use process-driven, arts-based interventions to encourage participant-lead conversation; to cultivate a safer space for listening; to evolve individual conceptions of self and self in relation to other; and to facilitate a deepening of our collective understanding of a given discussion topic.

The members of QR possess profound grace. Although I was cast as the group’s leader, the members’ collective wisdom offered unexpected lessons in how to sit with discomfort, how to hold space for nuance and complexity, and how to approach with great patience the longing for change.

What is the program budget? Please include all sponsors, and respective contributions. If you had preexisting resources that helped (e.g. discounted catering through dining services, physical spaces, etc) please note them.

A small stipend ($500) from QR’s host organization, the Ecumenical Chaplaincy at the University of Toronto, supports the execution of annual programming. Additionally, the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto co-collaborates with QR to provide complimentary meeting space throughout the academic year, a modest budget ($2000) for refreshments and supplies, and funding for one or two undergraduate students who serve as paid interns, overseeing the planning, promotion, and facilitation of the year’s events. The internship consists of 10 hours a week at $15.00 an hour from Sept 1 to Mar 15.

The anti-Archive Project received funding from multiple sources (all figures approximate):

ECUT QR FUND: $2,000
Multi-Faith Centre: $2,000
Knutson Endowment for Lutheran Campus Ministry: $3,000
Rosedale Presbyterian Church: $1,500
Fundrazr (Crowdfunding Campaign): $3,500
Other individual contributors: $1,000

Total: $13,000
What impact has your program made? Please include any intended learning outcomes, if there was an intended audience, and how you followed up with participants or not.

Our goal was to provide a safer space for learning and community at the intersection of gender identities, sexual orientations, religions, faith, and spiritualities. There have been various forms of follow-up and evaluation over the years. The “anti-Archive” is far and away the most robust form of follow-up.

What advice would you give someone running this program for the first time?

Make the lives and concerns of student participants central to the goal-setting and planning. Students value an opportunity to be asked what they would like to learn or do together, and how they would like to do it. Always offer hospitality in the form of food and beverages.

Do you want to add anything else?

Please note, the attached pdf images are the front and back of a postcard we created to advertise QR’s anti-Archive Project. They direct folks to the anti-Archive webpage and, consequently, to the QR Program website.

Thank you for taking the time to read through these materials.
Contributors

Dr. Jessica Joslin

Dr. Jessica Joslin holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on religious identity among college students, LGBTQ student success, and intersectionality. Jessica is approved for ordination in the United Church of Christ, and has held a number of ministerial roles. Prior to coming to Michigan, Jessica completed a Master of Divinity from Harvard University and a B.S. from Northwestern University. Pronouns: she/her/hers

Gordon Maples

Gordon Maples is a member of the Convergence Board of Directors, ACPA’s Commission on Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Meaning, and is the former Senior Campus Organizer for the Secular Student Alliance. He is currently a PhD student of Higher Education at North Carolina State University, where he focuses on religious, secular, and spiritual identity development of college students. He has also written and spoken on the separation of church and state in the context of higher education, interfaith engagement, student organization leadership, higher education governance issues, college athletics, fraternities/sororities, and portrayals of higher education on film.
J.T. Snipes, Ph.D

J.T. Snipes, Ph.D is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Prior to his faculty appointment he worked for over 12 years in higher education administration. Currently, his research interest focuses on religion and spirituality in higher education, African American collegiate students, and critical race theory in education. He recently completed his award-winning dissertation entitled, “Ain’t I Black too: Counterstories of Black Atheist in College.” It explores the narratives of secular African American students in college. His edited volume Remixed and Reimagined: Innovations in Religion, Spirituality, and (Inter)Faith in Higher Education will be published by Myers Educational Press Winter 2019. Bring Dr. Snipes to your campus discuss: critical interfaith praxis, intersectionality of race and religion, and secular students (atheist, agnostic, and non-religious).

Amy Richards

Amy Richards is a Career Consultant at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management. She has conducted over 1,000 career coaching sessions on a campus located in one of the most diverse cities in the world. She holds a BCom in Commerce & Finance and an MEd in Social Justice Education. Amy converted to Islam in 2013 and enjoys writing about the joys and challenges of this experience.
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:

Nov. 15, 2019 for publication in January 2020
March 13, 2020 for publication in May 2020
July 12, 2020 for publication in September 2020

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/m16e590j0ivs8v/

Questions can be directed to Dr. Jenny Small, Convergence Communication Director: jenny.small@convergenceoncampus.org.
What We’re Talking About
What’s Being Talked about on the Convergence Blog

REV. CHRISTIAN WATKINS: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS FOR PROGRAMMATIC SUCCESS

NORA BOND: INCLUSIVENESS REQUIRES HABIT SHIFTS: ALTERNATIVES TO THE EVERY DAY “GOD BLESS YOU”

DR. JENNY SMALL: CATCHING UP ON THE LATEST RSSI RESEARCH