

The Role of Religion in Inclusion: An International Graduate Student's Perspective

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Sociologists have long argued that understanding religion is the basis of understanding a specific society. Therefore, it would be fundamental for me to say that we need to understand the role of religion to consider making Purdue and its surrounding community inclusive. Considering religion in relation to inclusivity, I argue that there are three points requiring special attention. I will address these points before providing some suggestions to consider such inclusion.

Purdue University is a public institution with the largest number of international students in the country. Purdue has students from all continents; however, when we look at the list of countries of origin of most of the international students, we see an interesting picture. In Fall 2017, most international students- both undergraduate and graduate- were admitted from China, India, South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia in addition to Columbia and Brazil (Purdue ISS 2017). It is easy to notice that, other than the last two countries, the rest are not known to have large Christian populations. Therefore, Purdue admits a large body of international students who bring a diverse set of religious and cultural values. This situation fits very well with the overall trend in the country as the statistics indicate that new immigrants to the U.S. are increasingly from Muslim and Hindu faiths compared to the earlier waves of predominantly Christian immigrants (Pew Research 2013). Yet, our conversations around the role of religion in inclusion might be slow to catch up with this new trend. Therefore, I would like for us to ponder this question: Is the U.S. society in general and Purdue community in particular ready to acknowledge and address the increasingly diverse set of values and expressions for which new members of their communities would demand to have space and recognition?

There has been a lack of understanding of how religious identities might be shaped by someone's nationality and race outside of their own individual choices. For example, I identify as a secular and agnostic person, and that plays into how other people perceive me and what kind of a lifestyle I prefer and strive to have in Turkey. This identity also leads to tensions and a feeling of threat from the increasingly religious organization of everyday life in Turkey. However, coming

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to the U.S. made me realize that I do not have much control over my religious identity or how other people perceive me. My identity is almost fixed as my religion is tied to my nationality and therefore racialized outside of my voluntary choices. As an international graduate student from Turkey, I encountered many people assuming that being from a ‘Middle-Eastern’ country makes me an Arab, not Turkish, and a Muslim, but definitely not agnostic or even Christian or Jewish. This fixed identity is also closely tied to the prejudices and assumptions about how a Muslim looks and acts. When on several occasions I act outside of these presumptions, confusion and discomfort follow because I do not fit the stereotypical image of a Muslim woman.

We acknowledge Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism as institutional religions and have some set of rules and religious rituals that differentiate them from one another. However, what is becoming increasingly obvious is that there is a greater diversity in the way people identify with these institutional religions. There is no single way of being Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist. In the U.S., it is relatively easy for people to differentiate numerous denominations of Christianity. Christianity is recognized as diverse because of the variety in religious values and expressions among its denominations. This understanding of diversity in what it means to be of Christian faith seldom extends to other religions. Being raised in a secular Muslim family – what does that mean? It might be very difficult to imagine a secular Muslim person who does not veil or opts to drink alcohol. It might be hard to acknowledge how every little bit of difference in the lived religious experiences of an individual can have consequences. However, reducing a whole group of people from a specific religious background to a single and stereotypical image would eventually lead to ignorance of the diversity within the group.

Based on the key points raised above, I have three suggestions for how to create a more inclusive environment around Purdue for students, faculty, and staff with diverse religious and non-religious identities.

First, we need to start with acknowledging the ‘elephant’ in the room, that there are non-Christian, agnostic, and atheist members of Purdue community. We cannot and should not act like they do not exist, or they do not need an overdue acknowledgement in the discussions and practices addressing inclusion and diversity. Furthermore, there is an immense diversity among non-Christian groups of people. To ensure their right to express or not express their own religious identity the way they want to and have a safe space for that, requires us to carefully understand the scope and nature of this diversity. Understanding the diversity in the ways in which people identify with and live as a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, or an atheist requires education, listening, as well as open and safe interactions among these people. Interactions and exchanges are prerequisite to inclusion. Thus, we need to create safe spaces where they can take place. It should not be extremely uncomfortable for anyone to talk about the cultural and religious/non-religious elements of their identity among a predominantly White and Christian group of people. It is in fact very commonplace to hear people from the dominant culture talking about their own religious and cultural values, experiences, and opinions on this campus. The same comfort should be granted to people of other faiths and non-faith to share both profane and sacred components of their everyday life. While granting any freedom of expression on campus life, we need to also acknowledge power dynamics and inequalities embedded in it. For example, it is quite typical for a student to survey other students on their opinions related to dominant cultural and religious values, rituals, or holidays on campus. Just recently, I agreed to answer a

student's survey questions about Easter for her club while having lunch on campus. Now, imagine that another student wants to survey anyone on campus on a non-Christian holiday such as Ramadan, or Passover, or Diwali. Would the reactions of the people she requests to survey be the same in both situations? If not, what would that mean about the inclusiveness of the Purdue community in terms of allowing the expression of different religious/cultural ideas and values?

In addition, we cannot assume or demand that students from non-Christian or minority groups should be the ones to make an effort to be included unless we are also willing to teach the majority group about their religious, and cultural backgrounds. Because if we put that burden solely on minority groups, it would be called assimilation, not inclusion. As an example, all international students go through an intense orientation period when are admitted into departments/programs at Purdue. This orientation period includes several presentations and demonstrations on American culture. However, domestic students do not go through the same intense process. One important fact to note is that many international students already know a lot about American culture including the dominant religious values, more so than an average American student might know about any other culture. I understand that every domestic student cannot be taught about every single culture in the world but there are several ways this disparity could be overcome. Fortunately, Purdue houses several cultural centers and student associations of different nationalities setting an admirable example with their contributions to the diversity in campus activities. We need to support these centers and student associations in their efforts of both educating and creating exchanges among members of the Purdue community.

To ensure an ongoing exchange of religious values as well as expressions, we can surely make large-scale efforts. Nonetheless, we should also acknowledge the impact of very small changes which can be easily implemented. I would like to share an example of the effectiveness of very small adjustments we could consider. When I was an exchange student as an undergraduate at Emory University, the syllabi of courses I took included all religious holidays in the schedule. It was enlightening to see that every day had a religious significance for some group of students and sometimes, a single day was significant to more than one group. It helped me feel welcomed and acknowledged as a student not belonging to the dominant culture. I enjoyed taking the day off on a Muslim holiday which also has a cultural significance for me and my family just like Christmas is culturally and religiously important for many American people. Students, faculty, and staff would be able to learn about these holidays which many students might cherish. In addition, this would help us as educators and university officials to take into consideration what these students might be going through during a day which is important for them considering that they are away from their family and community.

Second, I would like to argue that any efforts for inclusion in the Purdue community should be in an active form. In this sense, we cannot simply be nice and smile at a Muslim woman student with a hijab and assume that she feels safer and more included on this campus. We need to ensure that she feels safe and included through active inclusive efforts. This starts by ensuring students of diverse backgrounds are given an equal place at the table and are actively included in the conversations around how to achieve and sustain inclusivity in and around Purdue community. Any inclusivity initiative should also aim to enable these members to actively contribute to their inclusion on this campus. Policies regarding inclusion should be carefully explained and made accessible to students. There is especially a lot to be done by those who are in power in their respective positions. We need to make sure that students have places to go,

people to turn to when they feel endangered and not welcomed in this community because of some flyers, or racial and xenophobic slurs, or some governmental regulations endangering their presence and participation in this educational institution. In the face of new exclusionary policies of the U.S. government related to certain religious groups, we must reach out and make sure students feel safe so that they can concentrate on their education. For example, during the infamous Muslim ban, receiving a supporting email from the Office of International Programs as well as from the Sociology department meant a lot to me.

Finally, we need to strongly recognize the fact that efforts towards broader inclusion on campus should transcend religion. I think that secularism plays a key role, and we need to acknowledge that inclusion is first and foremost a secular value. Education is and, in my opinion, must be secular. Every member of the Purdue community from every walk of life should be able to come together and feel connected to each other through collaboratively defined and established values shared by everyone. Any student's cultural and religious background should not impede their access to education including the material, discussions, as well as extra-curricular activities taking place in any educational institution. However, there must be an intricate balance of acknowledging every community member's religious and cultural backgrounds and catering to every single value that might in certain instances contradict the basic principles of inclusion. We cannot let these religious expressions and demands endanger the basic rights of groups who are excluded on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, ability, and age. We need to acknowledge how granting religious freedom to the expression of certain ideas on campus might create alienation of some other groups. For example, the commencement ceremonies include a short invocation and benediction conducted by different religious leaders each year. Considering that Purdue is a public and state-funded university, these segments of official ceremonies could be considered exclusionary for solely serving to the religious members of the community and alienating non-religious members. Inclusive ceremonies should be achieved not through non-denominational invocations but rather through the absence of any invocations.

In conclusion, understanding religion is crucial for our discussions around inclusion in Purdue community. Considering the scope of religious diversity among the members of this community, our discussions and practices need to address what this diversity means and how we can create a strong connection between diversity and inclusion. Primarily, it is essential to recognize all religious and non-religious expressions, beliefs, and practices among the new and old members of this community. We also need to acknowledge the challenges as well as contributions they bring to the existing order of things on this campus. Our second step would follow with enabling exchanges among groups of people with diverse backgrounds. Finally, we must actively engage in inclusive discussions and practices to understand and address the needs of members of diverse religious backgrounds by not only making space for them, but by openly confronting inequalities that lead to their social exclusion.

References

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