

Beyond Tolerance... **An Interview on Religious Pluralism with Victor Kazanjian**

Recently, Leslie M. Schwartz interviewed Victor Kazanjian about his experience developing at atmosphere of religious pluralism on the Wellesley campus. In this interview, he shares how other institutions can create environments within their campus communities that move beyond tolerance to embrace the inter-faith traditions of their students, faculty, and staff.

As the current Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Wellesley College, describe your position and the role your office plays in creating a campus culture that promotes and fosters religious pluralism.

My role at Wellesley started 15 years ago when I was invited to serve as a consultant on how the College was rethinking its relationship to religious and spiritual life on campus. My background was as an Episcopal priest and community organizer working with young adult development and often issues of inter-group conflict. Being particularly interested in how diversity might be a resource rather than a barrier to building pluralistic communities, Wellesley's efforts fascinated me. Wellesley was at a point where they recognized the increasing religious diversity of their students and they wanted to intentionally address their varying needs without marginalizing a particular group or faith. There was an underlying notion that in order to create multi-faith community and de-center Protestant Christianity from its normative hold on religious life, it was necessary to shift the structure of Wellesley's program.

I was hired as the first Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Wellesley in 1993 to create a new multi-faith program that was designed to respond to the rich diversity of religious traditions and spiritual beliefs where particular expressions of faith are celebrated. This was a departure from the traditional chaplain model because my position is not associated with any particular religious tradition, but rather focuses on creating opportunities for educating students holistically in order to create a more aware and engaged campus community.

As Dean, I became responsible for nurturing, caring for, over-seeing, and facilitating our multi-faith community in areas of spirituality and education. This includes coordinating a multi-faith religious life team including chaplains, advisors and student leaders for the

Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian (Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic) Hindu, Humanist, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Native African, Native American, Pagan, Sikh, Unitarian Universalist and Zoroastrian religious communities.

Our work in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life began with the notion of affirming the particularity of each religious group so they would feel welcomed at Wellesley. This included making sure each group had access to appropriate advising, space for worship and practice, as well as ways of gathering. A team of chaplains and advisors who work in our office continues to support this initial goal so no single voice becomes normative and silences other groups. Once each group felt represented on campus, we also worked to create specific programs and training sessions to expand community awareness about different religious traditions and practices and reduce ignorance to break down related stereotypes.

How would you differentiate tolerance from pluralism? Why is there a need for moving beyond tolerance within Higher Education?

There is a divide in understanding on these issues. Tolerance asks people to simply not cross lines of difference and avoid violating one another; it leaves people in a state of *suspended ignorance* where there is no commitment to get to know each other or explore that we live inter-dependant lives. This view of tolerance limits our understanding of diversity and negatively impacts higher education as well as our larger society. People who stop at tolerance, rather than embracing pluralism, cannot fully appreciate the value of diversity within the human community.

We are in need of strategies to engage diversity positively. Pluralism is about bringing people with profound differences together and managing the potential conflict that naturally results. Pluralism provides a balance between affirming particularity and creating a common life. We must discover and nurture this balance, all the while viewing pluralism as an unfolding process of building community where diversity is not seen as a barrier. There is a great need to model this conception of pluralism in order to teach the skills to engage complicated questions currently facing higher education.

What policies, programs, events, and experiences have you been a part of to promote religious pluralism in higher education?

Wellesley strives to cultivate a multi-cultural learning community where all religious and spiritual traditions are recognized and celebrated. By recognizing the importance pluralism plays in our understanding of each other and ourselves, we have developed campus organizations, initiatives, and programs to address the need for meaning making in our community. We have developed and sustained partnerships with many campus groups, including faculty, staff, student affairs professionals, and other administrators so these issues are not relegated to the margins of the institution.

One such initiative at Wellesley is called “Beyond Tolerance.” This ongoing program involves inter-faith education and dialogue around issues of religious diversity where we can explore places of conflict and commonality. A number of events provide students with opportunities to explore these areas throughout the academic year, including programs in the dorms, campus-wide programs, special workshops, guest speakers, and other activities. One of our biggest annual events is Flower Sunday – a multi-faith celebration of learning and friendship held every September where the campus community comes together to experience diversity and explore broader themes of spirituality.

Another initiative at Wellesley is “Exploring Spirituality” where we move beyond specific religious and spiritual practices in order to talk about larger issues of learning and living to engage in the process of meaning making in our daily lives. In this way, we recognize that learning is a holistic inter-dependant process when we place importance on developing the whole person, including their spiritual side. Ongoing training sessions for student leaders and staff also are central to developing a deeper understanding of these issues.

In order to ensure that student voices are heard, we also developed a Multi-Faith Student Council – a student-based leadership team for inter-faith work. This group meets weekly to discuss issues of religion and spirituality on campus in addition to helping plan campus-wide programs and train peer leaders. Along with our staff in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, these students seek out opportunities to engage the campus community in ways to increase awareness and provide experiential learning about different faith traditions.

Early on it was clear that our work was drawing interest from beyond the Wellesley College community, which led us to engage other campuses in this work. This movement that has resulted was initially forged in 1998 at the Education as Transformation Conference held at Wellesley where representatives from more than 300 colleges and universities gathered to discuss why questions of religious diversity and spirituality were not being engaged by higher education. EDUCATION as Transformation is now an international organization that works with colleges, universities, K-12 schools and related institutions exploring:

1. The impact of religious diversity on education and strategies for addressing this diversity.
2. The role of spirituality in educational institutions, and particularly its relationship to teaching and learning pedagogy; the cultivation of values; moral and ethical development; and the fostering of global learning communities and responsible global citizens.

EDUCATION as Transformation sponsors and co-sponsors educational programs and conferences, and works with professional organizations to engage issues of religious pluralism and spirituality in education. We provide consulting services upon request to

colleges, universities, and independent schools interested in having their programs, staff and facilities better support the growing religious diversity among students and the increasing demand for a spiritual dimension in education. Education as Transformation also publishes materials related to these issues including: "Beyond Tolerance: A Campus Religious Diversity Kit" produced by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), EDUCATION as Transformation, and "Studies in Education and Spirituality" produced by Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

What are some issues that Wellesley is currently facing regarding pluralism and how are these issues universal to the higher education community?

Within the higher education community, we are beginning to move beyond the knee-jerk reactions that spirituality has no place within our colleges and universities. We must begin to engage in a discourse around learning on a much broader, holistic level that includes multiple voices and perspectives. We need to create religious diversity programs that apply to *all students*, not just those who self-identify as religious. Students who self-identify as religious "exclusivist" also need to be included into dialogue on religious pluralism and spirituality.

Wellesley is currently trying to integrate these groups into the larger community through a monthly "Dinner and Dialogue" program that discusses different themes relating to religion and education. It benefits students to be exposed to and learn about these various communities that they will be interacting with for the rest of their lives as well as the skills to navigate through inter-group dialogue. If we are to embrace pluralism, we cannot eliminate these divergent voices.

We need to recognize that much of our current educational structure and system is based on particular religious traditions that influence our current practices. Our current college academic calendar that we have inherited reflects the privileged assent of Christian religious traditions. What messages does this send to other people in the community who are living in different patterns regarding their religious observance, and to what degree is the campus community sensitive to this? We need to work on de-centering the Protestant Christian ethos and norms from our institutions so other voices feel welcomed and included; yet this will involve some grief on the part of the community because of this systematic culture shift.

To begin to respond to this challenge, Wellesley began a multi-faith calendar project so faculty, staff, and students could become aware of certain groups' observances and food restrictions during the year. I am not a believer in making everything neutral, but rather we need to recognize the multiplicity of our community through intentional programs and celebrations that recognize a diversity of traditions. Other institutions might consider similar practices in order to increase awareness of various traditions and to foster an attitude of pluralism within their campus communities.

On a similar note, we need to shift our perspective of multi-cultural programming and be intentional in our practices and programs. It is important to consider how certain practices are being celebrated so they are not exclusive, but rather can become educational opportunities and conversations that help people develop awareness and understanding of different faiths. There is a difference between putting up a Christmas tree in a common space in the residence halls for three days in order to celebrate and educate students (along with displays at other times of the year for other traditions), compared to taking over the public space for four weeks, turning it into a Christmas-only space. That sends a very different message and silences under-represented groups.

What advice would you give to higher education administrators, faculty, staff, and students regarding religious pluralism?

We must begin by engaging faculty, staff, administrators, and students who represent diverse perspectives in a circle of conversations so their voices and narratives can be heard and shared. In order to create an environment that values and upholds pluralism, groups should not feel marginalized; rather they should be welcomed, supported, and appreciated for their unique perspectives and contributions to the entire community.

Administrators also should consider how to connect the educational mission of the college to issues of religious pluralism and spirituality. How can we articulate the relationship between religious diversity and fulfill the educational mission? This has to be a priority, starting on the top levels of higher education administration.

Overall, one of our global fundamental problems is ignorance – especially religious ignorance – of other communities. Students graduating from our colleges and universities are deficient if they have not had the opportunity to develop intellectual and practical skills around areas of religious diversity and spirituality; yet this concept is controversial today because the practical engagement of religion is currently viewed as separate from higher education. Nonetheless, we must teach students how to become educated citizens in a multi-cultural world. Where there is such a deep social ignorance, higher education must respond.

At root, issues of religious diversity and spirituality in higher education must be seen as *educational issues*, not religious ones. One of the principles that we have discovered only by making many mistakes over many years, is that ultimately questions about the role of religion and spirituality in higher education must start and end with the question “How does religion and spirituality enhance the education of our students?” not the question, “How do we support religion or religious institutions on our campuses?” This is a principle that religious professionals sometimes find hard to swallow. We discovered that if you can’t get past this question, it is best to stop, because your efforts will most likely lead to the perpetuating of old dysfunctional processes, not the birth of new constructive ones.

A meeting between students and faculty around questions of the role of religion and spirituality in higher education led to the formulation of central questions that we felt brought religion and spirituality together with the educational mission of our college. These questions included: What is the purpose of our learning? What does it mean to be an educated person? What does my learning/teaching have to do with my living in a multicultural, multi-religious world? Embedded in the questions and the many stories told by students and faculty is a vocabulary that seems to bridge the chasm between the language of religion/spirituality and the language of education/scholarship. We continue to seek ways to enact this language through our work at Wellesley College, and hope that other institutions can do the same.

Thank you very much for speaking with me and sharing, Victor.

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