

Public Relations and Religious Diversity: A Conceptual Framework for Fostering a Spirit of *Communitas*

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Abstract:

Changes in immigration law, globalization and increased ease of transportation have transformed modern societies into culturally diverse landscapes with religious diversity, in particular, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The author proposes a conceptual framework that embraces an interpretation of public relations as a social function, a *covenantal* model as a theoretical ground, an expanded *worldview* to include tolerance as an essential defining presupposition, and expanded communicative conceptual parameters that include religion in definitions of diversity and generic principles of excellent practice. An anecdotal review of faith communities in the U.S. reveals that public relations professionals and other communicators model the conceptual framework in interfaith initiatives and that the framework would serve as a helpful foundation for guiding communication professionals toward such behaviour. The study also illustrates that socially-responsible behaviour often has a foundation of faith common across various faith traditions.

Keywords: Communitas; Faith; Public Relations; Religious Diversity; Spiritual Community

Résumé:

Les changements dans les lois de l'immigration, la mondialisation et la facilité croissante du transport ont transformé les sociétés modernes en paysages culturellement diversifiés, avec la diversité religieuse en particulier qui présente des opportunités ainsi que des défis. L'auteur propose un cadre conceptuel qui encourage une interprétation des relations publiques en tant que fonction sociale, un modèle *covenantale* comme ancrage théorique, une vision élargie du monde afin d'inclure la tolérance en tant que présupposition essentiel et des paramètres conceptuels de communication élargie qui incluent la religion dans les définitions de la diversité et des principes génériques de la bonne pratique. Une révision anecdotique des communautés religieuses aux États-Unis révèle que les professionnels des relations publiques ainsi que d'autres communicateurs modélisent le cadre conceptuel dans des initiatives interreligieuses et que ce cadre peut servir à une fondation utile qui peut guider les professionnels de communication vers ce comportement. Cette étude illustre aussi qu'un comportement socialement responsable a souvent une fondation de foi qui est commune à travers les différentes traditions confessionnelles.

Mots-clés: Communitas; Foi; Relations Publiques; Diversité Religieuse; Communauté Spirituelle

We come together because our love for God and humanity inspires it; our concern for justice, freedom and peace demands it; and what we can learn from each another requires it... we intend to be a symbol of moral unity in a broken world.

Vision Statement of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, D.C.
(Dasa, 2004: 126)

Media reports of civil unrest suggest that the twenty-first century is an age of mistrust, misunderstanding, and conflict among peoples of different cultural identities. Some have argued that “at the origin of possible conflicts we find disparities between cultures”, which really are “the result of a misunderstanding between two politics” (Coup de Frejac, 1999: 7-8). Others contend that today’s “new kind of geopolitical conflict” is truly “entangled in the intangibles of religion, ethnicity and tribal identity” and that “religion has been part of the 21st—century problem” (Bole, 2003: 5). Social scientists have even argued, in fact, that religion per se has a harmful influence on society and needs to be rooted out and disposed of. More generally, many decry a universal lack of civility that characterizes both public discourse and behaviour as U.S. President Barack Obama noted:

our discourse has become so sharply polarized...we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who think differently than we do—it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds.

(Pace & Feller, 2011: 3A)

Examples abound to illustrate that “through dialogue, fostered by civic-minded communicators” and others of goodwill, “much can be done to dispel common fears and misconceptions that fuel ‘uncivil’ discourse and open hostility” (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2006: 130) particularly if “responsible people, such as managers and PR professionals . . . deprive politics of one of the most powerful weapons—using culture as part of the arsenal” (Coup de Frejac, 1999: 7).

As for religion, evidence suggests that “all religions fulfill numerous social and psychological needs”, some of which seem to be universal—explaining the unknown and thus relieving anxiety, providing a means to deal with crises, setting precedents for acceptable behaviour, and furnishing “the substratum of common purposes and values upon which the equilibrium of the community depends” (Haviland, 1978: 334). Researchers point out that charity is an important obligation for many faith traditions, with faith communities helping those in need through social service projects—homeless shelters, AIDS clinics—that often are interfaith in nature. If anything, in diverse societies religion can be a bridge to unity rather than to division. As President Obama noted in a memorial service following a shooting rampage in Tucson, Arizona in January 2011 that left six dead and 13 wounded, including U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, “the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us” (Pace & Feller, 2011: 3A), a sentiment echoed in his State of the Union address less than two weeks later:

We believe that in a country where every race and faith and point of view can be found, we are still bound together as one people; that we share common hopes and a common creed; that the dreams of a little girl in Tucson [among those killed] are not so different than those of our own children, and that they all deserve the chance to be fulfilled.

(Obama, 2011)

Methodology

This study takes an anecdotal review of faith communities and their activities in the U.S. using a combination of qualitative methods to obtain data on religious diversity, place-of-worship activities, and public relations practices. Telephone and e-mail interviews of key figures were conducted to gather data and probe the development of public relations strategies and effects. A textual analysis of media coverage and institutional media, including electronic material, and field observations of religious sites provided further data. The study underscores that 1) public relations professionals, educators and other communicators play an important role in resolving religious conflict and fostering tolerance and *communitas* or fellowship (Turner & Turner, 1978) through interfaith initiatives, including community service; 2) such communicative behaviour models a conceptual framework that values dialogue, tolerance, religious diversity and the social responsibility of the profession, which serve as a foundation for guiding communication

professionals toward such behaviour; and 3) socially-responsible behaviour often has a foundation of faith common across faith traditions.

A Theoretical Approach

One of the great struggles the public relations profession has had since its inception has been to formulate a universally-accepted view of itself. After much debate the Society's governing body formally adopted a definition that has become accepted and widely used—"public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other" (Public Relations Society of America, 2003). In fleshing out its official view of the profession, PRSA observes that the definition "recognizes that all organizations have multiple publics from which they must earn consent and support" (Ibid).

This notion of public relations implies several inherent components: 1) two-way symmetrical communication is essential to successful practice (Grunig & Hunt, 1994); 2) such communication must be used "to facilitate relationships and understanding between an organization and its many publics" (McElreath, 1997: 3); and 3) as a management function, public relations "defines and emphasizes the responsibility to serve the public interest" (Hutton, 1999: 201). And, these dimensions point the way to other definitions that have always characterized good practice but which, more recently, have received increased emphasis:

- To reconcile or adjust in the public interest those aspects of our personal and corporate behaviour which have a social significance (Harwood Childs, late 1930s, cited in Public Relations Society, 2003: 3);
- The values-driven management of relationships between an organization and the publics that can affect its success (Guth & Marsh, 2005: 2); and
- Doing good and getting credit for it (Seitel, 1989: 11)

These further interpretations of the profession emphatically suggest the quintessential importance of the *social dimension* as well as the *ethical underpinnings* of public relations as it is to be practiced (Tilson, 2009, September). As Kruckeberg and Stark note, "public relations is essentially a process of restoring a sense of community. This process ... applies to corporations and to various organizations as well as to towns and cities" (cited in Public Relations Society, 2003: 2). And, "values-driven" according to Guth and Marsh implies that "public relations is . . . guided by personal, organizational, professional, and societal values. In turn, that implies honorable and ethical activity" (2005: 2). Such values underscore the individual worth of every person and serve as a foundation for public relations professionals who would best serve their organizations and communities (Tilson, 1999). As an organization that has established values-driven goals strives to achieve these, it will build relationships based on a commonality of values and with a level of trust and acquire the resources it needs that, ultimately, will be in the best interests of all. Such "value-based relationships" built on "interaction to achieve actualization of all members of the community" have been characterized as *strategic cooperative communities* (Wilson, 1996: 75-76). Organizations that proceed in their relationships on the basis of "mutual respect, trust, and human dignity, not on profit or personal gain" are "focused on the good of all rather than being primarily self-interested" (Ibid), an approach that goes beyond traditional rationalist and number-oriented management thinking by taking a long-term, consensual view of

relationships and institutional decision-making from research to the formulation of strategy and tactics.

Directly embodied in the concept of good citizenship is the communicative dimension in general and public relations in particular. As Christians, Rotzoll, Fackler, McKee, and Woods underscore, “building and sustaining mutually beneficial relationships with key publics is the foundational goal of public relations practice” (2005: 224). As Bauer notes, “the task of public relations practitioners is to balance stakeholder demands and societal expectations with the goals of the company and communicate in an effective manner by developing socially responsible strategies” (2008: 20). Such an approach that encompasses “mutual understanding” and reciprocity in relationships “as a primary goal for public relations” (Deatherage & Hazelton, 1998: 58) reflects a symmetrical worldview that directs communicative behaviour toward excellence and effectiveness of practice (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & White, 1992); conversely, an asymmetrical worldview built on a different set of assumptions about “morality, ethics, human nature, religion, politics, free enterprise, or gender” (Grunig & White, 1992: 32; cited in Deatherage & Hazelton, 1998: 58) influences behaviour toward the opposite direction. As illustrated in *Table 1*, the presuppositions that constitute both worldviews, as proposed by Grunig (1989), describe opposing universes that “influence the selection of public relations models and consequently the effectiveness of public relations” (Deatherage & Hazelton, 1998: 57). An asymmetrical worldview would direct practitioners, for example, toward asymmetrical models of public relations, and a symmetrical worldview would move behaviour toward a two-way symmetrical model.

Table 1: Worldviews—Presuppositions

<i>Asymmetrical Worldview</i>	<i>Symmetrical Worldview</i>
Internal orientation	Interdependence
Closed system	Open system
Efficiency	Moving equilibrium
Elitism	Equity
Conservatism	Autonomy
Tradition	Innovation
Central authority	Decentralization of management
	Responsibility
	Conflict resolution
	Interest group liberalism

A trust-based *covenantal model* of public relations has been suggested as a theoretical ground for the profession (Koehn, 1994; cited in Baker, 2002), a model that has particular relevance to communication within a religious context. According to Koehn, “professional practices qualify as morally legitimate because, and to the extent that, they are structures to merit the trust of clients” (1994: 8; cited in Baker, 2002: 193). Professionals establish their authority “because

they are experts . . . or service providers” who make “a public promise to serve . . . a particular (client) good” and who “dedicate their lives” to promoting that interest (Koehn, 1994: 15, 59, 69; cited in Baker, 2000: 194, 196, 197) in a proactive manner. Moreover, “persons become clients because they seek some good they lack and are unable to provide for themselves” (Koehn, 1994: 58; cited in Baker, 2002: 196) and become “the minister’s congregant, the doctor’s patient and the lawyer’s advisee” (Baker, 2002: 196). According to Koehn, the public promise must be “to furthering an end which is genuinely good” and “desirable in its own right”—“health, salvation, or justice”—if a practitioner is to have the requisite moral authority inasmuch as “the pledge would not ground authority if the promised good were actually an evil” (1994: 153, 69, 179, 88; cited in Baker, 2002: 198, 197, 199). Baker (2002) argued that “in order for public relations practice to move to professional status, and . . . into a covenantal model”, the profession “must devote itself to a particular human good or need (as . . . the clergy to client spiritual well-being)” that is grounded in a “public pledge to serve this need” and “practices . . . that foster strong and effective relationships” (204, 201). Baker noted that, it might be more appropriate for public relations professionals to speak of “fostering” relationships rather than merely facilitating them inasmuch as the word *foster* denotes “promoting the growth or development of” and “incorporates elements that are essential to relationships—notions of nurturance, feeding, and growth [that] are . . . harmonious with the covenantal model” (2002: 200).

Inherent within value-based relationships (Guth & Marsh, 2005) and a *covenantal model* of public relations are notions of respect and tolerance, which, given the importance of consensus in democratic societies and the role of public relations in fostering the free flow of ideas and in bridging gaps dividing peoples (Guth & Marsh, 2000), argue that the cosmology of practitioner *worldviews* (Grunig, 1989) should be expanded to include *tolerance* (or lack of) as one of the essential defining presuppositions. As *Table 2* indicates, Rokeach (1973) lists *broadminded* (*open-minded*) as an *instrumental value* in his classification system of the dominant values of a culture “that relate to modes of conduct, and represent beliefs that are socially and personally preferable in all situations with respect to all objects” (cited in Mueller, 2004: 132-133).

Fraleigh and Tuman (1997) trace the relation of religious tolerance and freedom of speech—essential ingredients for a democratic society—throughout history, noting that intolerance inhibited the growth of freedom in ancient Egyptian, Sumerian, Hebrew, African, Islamic, and European cultures. Inasmuch as the presupposition of *Equity* of the symmetrical worldview—“people should be given equal opportunity and be respected as fellow human beings”—and that of *Elitism* of the asymmetrical worldview—“leaders of the organization know best . . . wisdom is not the product of a ‘free marketplace of ideas’” (McElreath, 1997: 20-21)—suggest either the presence or lack thereof of *tolerance* in their respective embrace, the definitions of these two dimensions should expressly address *tolerance* as an inherent element.

Moreover, given the cultural diversity of modern societies—with “religion and culture . . . inextricably interwoven” (Gormly, 1999: 24)—a key to evaluating whether or not faith community initiatives constitute excellent public relations behaviour as influenced by worldviews may lie in broadening communicative conceptual parameters to include faith traditions and their underlying principles. For example, the generic principles characterizing “excellent public relations applicable across cultures and political/ economic systems” as posited by IABC Research Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators includes “*Diversity Embodied in All Roles*” but defines such diversity as “both men and women in all roles, as well as practitioners of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds” (Verçic, Grunig & Grunig, 1996: 39) to the exclusion of religion. Survey research of public relations

directors and CEOs in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom to establish and confirm characteristics necessary for practicing excellent public relations initially identified and later re-focused on diversity as one of the essential criteria but has defined diversity as “support for women in [the] organization” (Grunig & Grunig, 2000: 318). Hon and Brunner (2000) observe that public relations research on diversity has been largely limited to race and gender; a fuller view of diversity, they note, should encompass the definition offered by Bhawuk and Triandis—“difference in ethnicity, race, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, veteran status, age, national origin, and cultural and personal perspectives” (cited in Hon & Brunner, 2000 : 312). Inasmuch as Grunig and Grunig admit, “the major premise of the Excellence theory stated that communication has value to an organization because it helps to build good long-term relationships with strategic publics” (2000: 314), arguably in religiously-diverse societies faith traditions should be included among cultural factors that warrant consideration by communicators.

Table 2: Rokeach’s Eighteen Terminal and Instrumental Values

<i>Terminal Values</i>	<i>Instrumental Values</i>
A comfortable life (a prosperous life)	Ambitious (hardworking, aspiring)
An exciting life (a stimulating, active life)	Broadminded (open-minded)
A sense of accomplishment (lasting contribution)	Capable (competent, effective)
A world at peace (free of war and conflict)	Cheerful (lighthearted, joyful)
A world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts)	Clean (neat, tidy)
Equality (brotherhood, equal opportunity for all)	Courageous (standing up for your beliefs)
Family security (taking care of loved ones)	Forgiving (willing to pardon others)
Freedom (independence, free choice)	Helpful (working for the welfare of others)
Happiness (contentedness)	Honest (sincere, truthful)
Inner harmony (freedom from inner conflict)	Imaginative (daring, creative)
Mature love (sexual and spiritual intimacy)	Independent (self-reliant, self-sufficient)
National security (protection from attack)	Intellectual (intelligent, reflective)
Pleasure (an enjoyable leisurely life)	Logical (consistent, rational)
Salvation (saved, eternal life)	Loving (affectionate, tender)
Self-respect (respect, admiration)	Obedient (dutiful, respectful)
Social recognition (respect, admiration)	Polite (courteous, well-mannered)
True friendship (close companionship)	Responsible (dependent, reliable)
Wisdom (a mature understanding of life)	Self-controlled (restrained, self-disciplined)

In embracing such a conceptual framework, communication professionals can create an “ecology” favorable to *communitas*—“a relational quality of full unmediated communication,

even communion...which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship” (Turner & Turner, 1978: 250). An “essential and generic human bond . . . central to religion”, *communitas* “strains toward universalism and openness” in an “undifferentiated, egalitarian” spirit (Ibid: 250-251) and often is found in moments of interfaith encounters.

A Multi-hued Landscape

Modern nation-states have become particularly diverse in recent decades owing in part to changes in immigration law, globalization and increased ease of transportation. The U.S., for example, became multi-hued in the wake of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which lifted immigrant quotas previously in place for 50 years, opening borders to new arrivals from developing nations (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2004). As Bartos notes, “in large numbers, these most recent immigrants represented ‘the world’s religions’: Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Zoroastrian, African and Afro-Caribbean” (2002: 10). By 2001 Muslim and Buddhist populations in the U.S. already had surpassed more than a million each with the number of Hindu faithful also approaching that level.

Such diversity presents both opportunities and challenges as immigrants re-create their religious traditions in their adopted homeland. In some U.S. communities, the “new religious America” has not been well received—physical violence and vandalism of homes and religious spaces have been a problem—as new immigrants have been more inclined to demonstrate their ethnic and religious pride and less reluctant to shed their customs and culture in favour of those of their adopted “homeland” (Many moving away from areas that attract immigrants, 1998). Workplace religious-based complaints have risen faster than other types of discrimination complaints “due in large part to the nation’s increasing religious diversity” as well as “changing expectations by workers who are now more openly bringing a religious identity to the job” (Geller, 2003: 4C). Complaints of religious discrimination made to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission jumped more than 20% in 2002, “driven primarily by claims of retaliation against Muslims” even as complaints “involving a broad range of religions have slowly mounted—up 85 percent over the past decade [1,388 in 1992 versus 2,572 in 2002]” (Geller, 2003: 1C). In 2008, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, hate crimes against religious groups “increased sharply” jumping nearly 9% over the previous year, far surpassing the annual increase (2%) of hate crimes in total (More hate crimes, 2009: 3A).

The “Detroit Experience” and Beyond

In the midst of such tensions, public relations professionals and other communicators are playing a role in resolving religious conflict. As community power theorists contend, “significant others” in a community (family, friends, and others) can influence public opinion as well as the behaviour of individuals in a positive direction (McElreath, 1997). Moreover, a public interest approach to public relations as practiced by religious communicators often is based on inherent tenets of faith and mirrors internal faith community–congregant communication built on a *covenantal*-like foundation of mutual trust and respect.

For example, Detroit community leaders have been working successfully to diffuse tensions among peoples of different faiths. With more than 129 distinct nationalities and one of the largest Arab populations outside the Middle East—estimates are that “the four-county region of southeastern Michigan has a population of at least 200,000 of Middle Eastern origin (Ghosh,

2010: 51)—Detroit and its environs represent a truly diverse community. Interfaith Partners, founded in the wake of 9-11, is a network of religious leaders, scholars and peace activists who work together on community projects—art exhibits, interfaith worship, “Abrahamic” salons to discuss shared faith traditions and so on. The group, affiliated with the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion, launched an annual Interfaith Heroes Month in January 2008 as a celebration of leaders who have “reached out across the boundaries of faith, ethnicity and race to build stronger communities” (Buttry, 2008). Their Web site (www.readthespirit.com) and annual published collection of stories about Interfaith Heroes—Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama, for example—highlight the beauty that lies within peoples of all “hues”. News of their efforts prompted a delegation of Dutch officials including Dutch Cabinet Minister Francis Timmermans to meet in April 2009 with Detroit-area Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders to learn more about fostering a climate of tolerance (Krupa, 2009) and to bring lessons learned home to a Dutch society struggling with bigotry toward its Muslim community. At the conclusion of their visit, Timmermans observed that the road to social integration “begins with talking to each other about our differences. Social peace is brought about not just by what you share, but by what you accept as different” (Ibid: 2).

In Detroit, as elsewhere, the road to peaceful co-existence is not always smooth. Following the Persian Gulf War, “many Detroit-area students of Jewish, Chaldean [pre-Arab Iraqis, mostly Catholic, numbering more than 100,000 in the area], and Muslim backgrounds . . . were emotionally upset and hurt because they had relatives in Israel, Iraq or in the armed forces either here or in the Middle East” (Tracy, 2003: 10). “No accurate flow of information” and “a lot of misunderstanding among the staff and students” led to “ill will and tensions” in the public schools, particularly at West Bloomfield High where 16% of the students were Chaldean-American. In October 2002, civic and religious leaders created the West Bloomfield School-Community Mid-East Task Force, representing various religions and cultures, the police, local government and student leaders. Fact sheets explaining each religion were developed and distributed throughout the school and community, and “a series of multiethnic and religious panel discussions” (Ibid) were held. Through dialogue, community tensions were diffused.

The following year, the Detroit PRSA chapter organized a workshop at the Arab Cultural Center for Economic and Social Services to educate members and the general public about the Arab-American community in the city and the role of public relations in a multicultural society (Public Relations Society of America—Detroit Chapter, 2003). Presently, there are more than 15,000 businesses in the Detroit metro area owned by Middle Easterners, and “the Arab-American community . . . produces as much as \$7.7 billion annually in salaries and earnings” according to a 2007 Wayne State University study—“more than twice Detroit’s annual budget” (Ghosh, 2010: 52). Local civic and business leaders attended the program, organized with the help of public relations students from Eastern Michigan University. The Detroit chapter started its diversity program in 2002, led by Renée Ahee, a local practitioner, and regularly organizes luncheons to showcase international holiday celebrations and workshops at various venues, including Detroit’s Holocaust Museum, as well as roundtable discussions and receptions to bring together diverse faith, ethnic and cultural communities (Public Relations Society of America—Detroit Chapter, 2003; Ahee, Personal Communication, 2005, April 11). Fittingly, the Detroit chapter received a National Diversity Award for outstanding leadership at PRSA’s International Conference in 2003, the first year that PRSA presented its awards. In 2008, Ahee co-founded a group of Arab, Jewish and African-American women—the Museum Ladies—who probe various issues including religious differences (Ahee, 2008).

Paralleling PRSA in some respects and leading the way in others, the Religion Communicators Council, founded in 1929 as “an international interfaith association of religion communicators at work in print and electronic communication, marketing and in public relations” (Religion Communicators Council, 2009), endeavours to “promote excellence in the communication of religious faith and values in the public arena and encourage understanding among religious and faith groups” (Ibid) through programming at national conferences and local chapters in the U.S. The Council’s Wilbur Awards recognize excellence in the communication of religious issues, values and themes in the secular media, while its DeRose-Hinkhouse Memorial Awards honour those who demonstrate excellence in religious communications and public relations. In 2009, an RCC scholarship student—a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis and member of the Muslim Students Association—was among 30 interfaith fellows selected by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation to visit humanitarian projects against malaria in Africa and then educate youth groups and religious communities through programs to promote awareness of the disease (Religion Communicators Council, 2009). In using their skills in communication, fellows demonstrate the role faith can play in doing something positive and compassionate.

Even when conflict does not galvanize a community, people of goodwill can come together to celebrate their differences with help from those in the communication profession and educators. Public relations students at the University of Miami, for example, have helped the campus ministry to organize and promote religious diversity activities. As a class project, students have assisted with the logistics and publicity for student interfaith panel discussions, musical expressions of faith, and candlelight vigils for peace. The initiative was honoured with a *Florida Leader* magazine’s “Best of Florida Schools” award in recognition of the impact the efforts had on campus relations (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2004). More significantly, as students learned to apply their skills to real-life projects, they also learned something more important—to use their talents for the common good. In nearby suburban Pinecrest, confirmation class students of Christ the King Lutheran Church visited their neighbors at Temple Beth Or during the Shabbat service in October 2010 “to worship and reflect on the faith tradition at the synagogue” and to deepen their understanding of Jewish scripture as part of their studies (Hines, 2010: 14SE). The two congregations began an ongoing relationship four years ago when Beth Or held its High Holy Day services at the church. Leaders of both faith groups “see this example of mutual respect and cooperation between faith-based communities as an antidote to the increasing trend of tension between such communities” (Ibid). Christ the King’s pastor sent a news release to the media to report on the fellowship and to inspire other interfaith partnerships; the release prompted *The Miami Herald’s* Neighbors in Religion columnist, among other media, to comment on the initiative.

Education is essential in promoting mutual understanding whether among youngsters or parents. As the Dalai Lama wrote in a letter defending the Department of Religious Studies at Florida International University from those who wished to save money by eliminating the program, “in our deeply interconnected world, understanding and appreciation of diversity of religions is critical in fostering a culture of genuine tolerance and peaceful coexistence (Kaleem, 2009: 1B). In light of the Dalai Lama’s \$100,000 donation and offer to fundraise for the department, FIU’s board of trustees decided to keep the program intact. In 2010, the Dalai Lama returned as part of a fundraising visit to South Florida; he also addressed students at the University of Miami during his stay.

Religion and Community Service

Faith without works is dead.

(Jm 2:17)

But fostering interfaith dialogue is only part of the role that communicators play in faith communities. In keeping with a shared philosophy of compassion, religious groups have reached out into the broader community and beyond through acts of social justice, efforts enhanced by and through communication that can lead to a greater public appreciation of the value of faith in society (Tilson, 2009, October 22).

For example, the Shiva-Vishnu Temple in Livermore, California, through its Human Services arm (whose motto is “Serve God By Serving Humanity”), notes on its Web site that it has “the responsibility of serving the communities locally and globally . . . irrespective of religion, race, and cultural identity depending upon the available funds, on a priority and need basis” (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2006: 127). The temple offers free basic health screening services for half a day twice a month, although patients are requested to donate cash and in-kind, but, while the Web site notes that “the services are meant for visiting devotees and their friends and relatives”, such services “are open to all independent of any restrictions” (Ibid). In total, 16 different service projects—some aimed at the larger community—include activities with senior centers, support to other nonprofit organizations dedicated to human services, distribution of clothing, blankets, and toys in India and the U.S. and donations to victims of natural disaster. The Livermore Amador Valley Transit Authority, a government agency that provides public transport to surrounding cities and unincorporated areas, has recognized the temple “for its contribution to the local community . . . and the senior transportation program that LAVTA champions” (Ibid: 128).

The Sri Siva Vishnu Temple in Lanham, Maryland, also has a community-minded focus, given its location in Washington, D.C., a city with significant diversity. The temple’s vision, featured on its Web site, emphasizes good citizenship through community service and dialogue:

Sri Siva Vishnu Temple . . . has become a place that brings together Hindu customs and heritage with American values of community and volunteerism... focusing on Hindu families as well as the broader community. . . . offering help through local charities such as soup kitchens and shelters.

(Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2006: 128)

In serving others, and in communicating their vision of service, Hindu faith communities not only gather broader support for such initiatives but foster greater public appreciation for their congregations and for Hinduism in general. As Rao observes, “temples should become community outreach centers, making sure the larger society is fully aware of their presence and their programs . . . [in so doing] temples would become vibrant centers for exchange of information and knowledge” (2004: A17).

Similarly, thanks to encouragement from the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Muslims around the U.S. have been helping their neighbours in need. Projects have included bringing food and supplies to homeless shelters in Sacramento, California, collecting school supplies for underprivileged children in Columbus, Ohio, conducting a public health fair in Cincinnati, and providing clothes, toiletries and food to the homeless of Miami (Latifi, 2006;

Beras, 2007). According to CAIR communications coordinator, Rabiah Ahmed, the rationale behind the national initiative was not only to foster a more positive public perception of Islam but a deeper faith among Muslims:

We want to encourage them to go to beyond their mosques and their comfort levels and truly practice the religion . . . It also helps with the image issue. We find that Americans tend to change their attitude when they see Muslims engaged in service work and not just foreign policy.

(Latifi, 2006: 9A)

In 2008, at a special press conference, eight South Florida Islamic centers presented several thousand dollars through the local CAIR to the Archdiocese of Miami and Catholic Charities to help victims of a cyclone in Burma; at the conference, Altaf Ali, South Florida CAIR's executive director, and then-Archbishop John C. Favalora urged the public to "take advantage of . . . the success of this collaboration . . . to obtain a bigger response from the community" (Leal-Gonzalez, 2008: A13). The gesture was yet another act of kindness in an ongoing relationship between the leaders of these two faith traditions, who regularly meet with the Jewish community to explore ways of partnering on projects (Ibid).

Community efforts that join people of different faiths together on projects of social justice can create moments of *communitas* that can, in turn, foster tolerance and greater mutual understanding. In yet another local initiative to improve interfaith relations, Detroit's Jewish Federation, the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Council of Islamic Organizations of Michigan joined hands (literally and figuratively) in a Christmas Day community service project in 2009. Nearly 1,000 Muslims and Jews worked together at a food bank in nearby Pontiac as part of Mitzvah Day, a 20-year Jewish tradition in the Detroit area to help people in need through local social service agencies. Leaders of both faith groups "recognized a shared commitment to community service" based on religious tenets and wanted to take a "small but significant step in defusing tensions and promoting good will" (Karoub, 2009: 9A). As the executive director of the Jewish Council noted, "the grass-roots connection builds relationships on a personal level . . . because you work side by side with . . . other people", a sentiment shared by the Islamic Council chair who observed that it was "a public way for the two faith communities to 'build bridges of understanding and cooperation'" (Ibid). Similarly, members of Temple Judea, a reform congregation in the Coral Gables area of South Florida, have partnered with volunteers from Christ Episcopal Church in running a weekly soup kitchen at the historically-black church in nearby Coconut Grove for more than 20 years. Ties between the two congregations "are deep" and rooted in the Civil Rights movement when the leaders of both faith communities began a partnership for social justice in many areas including hunger although as the pastor of Christ Episcopal explained, "it was a bigger thing than just the food" (Isensee, 2010: 12SE). Hafner and Kram (2010) explain the broader *communitas* nationally that sprang from a shared sense of human rights:

perhaps one of the greatest times of interfaith cooperation and dialogue in the last century was during the civil rights movement. Led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this movement of faith led people to find their commonality in the struggle for human dignity and equality. . . . The movement was characterized by the notion that faith groups participate together for the betterment of social and

political institutions and to make systemic change. And, perhaps, most importantly, we were reminded that the “other” is not an enemy or someone to be feared, but rather a complement to us and a partner in the journey to become more loving and human together.

(Hafner & Kram, 2010: 5L)

Conclusion

Initiatives that diffuse local tensions, foster understanding, tolerance and *communitas*, promote interfaith partnerships and invite public participation in such efforts demonstrate the role that public relations practitioners, educators and other communicators can play in moving others toward a greater sense of social responsibility, ennobling their profession in the process. Such examples are encouraging in that they attest to the goodness that lies within all peoples, regardless of their faith tradition, and illustrate what faith communities can do collectively to help others in time of need.

But, communication professionals, whether educators or practitioners, still have a long way to go in fostering religious dialogue and mutual understanding. Most public relations associations, for example, have yet to fully focus on religion as a topic for discussion or research. PRSA, the profession’s premier association in the U.S., offers a host of Interest Sections—Technology, Food and Beverage to name a few—but does not have a Section on Religion. Moreover, the Society has only minimally addressed religion in its programming, with a panel discussion on the impact of faith on global issues at the United Nations in January 2005 and a teleseminar on religious diversity and community relations in June 2005, both moderated by the author. Its sister-like organization, the Association for Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication’s Public Relations Division—the largest organization of public relations educators in the world—has yet to include religion and public relations as a topic in its conferences (Tilson, 2009, December). The BledCom Symposia, which convenes public relations educators and practitioners annually in Slovenia, awarded its 2009 Special Prize for best new research—sponsored with the Institute for Public Relations—to German researchers for their work on culture and public relations; however, in proposing an analytical platform for understanding corporate communication, no mention was made of the role of religion in society (Sievert & Porter, 2009). As an area of published public relations research, religion is relatively unexplored territory with few articles appearing in the profession’s leading journals. Certainly, if religion is as central to society as it would seem, public relations professionals should be as attentive to the role that faith plays in forming the cultural environment of communities as they are to language, customs, cultural distance, and other behavioural aspects, something advertising and marketing professionals have known for years (Mueller, 2004).

Facilitating civil discourse or publicizing the civil side of faith communities will not be easy, and in many cases such stories will not be considered newsworthy. As the director of Catholic Relief Services once commented, “teaching tolerance, reconciliation, cooperation, and mutual understanding is not glamorous, and it probably doesn’t seem very urgent. TV cameras don’t roll when sanity prevails or when children of different ethnic backgrounds and traditions learn and play together” (Hackett, 2004: 2), but “interreligious dialogue, especially in conflict-ridden societies . . . is a much-preferred alternative to slaughtering one another” (Bole, 2003: 5). Simply put, “we must learn to speak with each other...as persons of faith, as persons with

families and children to care for and to share our fears and concerns in a welcoming and honest atmosphere... to have a sacred conversation” (Hafner & Kram, 2010: 5L).

If, as some contend, the purpose of public relations is to manage and resolve “conflict in the organization-public social system” through open communication and negotiation and according to “the principles of the art of living well (ethics)” to ultimately “achieve an integration of interests” (Simões, 1992: 191, 196, 199), then such “harmonizing” efforts are essential if the religious diversity gap in communities is to be bridged. Inasmuch as communication, education, and understanding are requisites for harmonious co-existence in complex societies, civic-minded public relations professionals and other communicators can play an important role in fostering such “conversations” and resolving conflict through open communication and negotiation even if such efforts fail to make headline news. In short, religious diversity calls for those of goodwill to engage their skills “to encourage dialogue, instead of diatribe” (Alvarez, 1995: 22-23), mutual cooperation and a spirit of *communitas* and to conduct the research necessary to broaden the body of knowledge. In so doing, communicators can help to transform the world into a global community that is civil, ethical and equitable for all peoples. For a basic moral test of society is the welfare of its most vulnerable members. And, in using their time, talent, and their treasure in following such a path, communicators will not only best serve their profession but also the common good.

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