

Intercultural Inquiry of Religion and Identity-Making at Carnegie Mellon University

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Introduction

Is identity shaped internally or externally? As students in the class *Talking Across Differences* at Carnegie Mellon University, we found this to be an intriguing question. The original intent of our group was to focus on the internal aspects of identity-making at CMU, but we discovered that no identity-making process can be solely internal. As a class, we were exploring the challenges faced by CMU students in forming their identities. We sought to determine what the main factors in identity formation were, whether they be other people's perceptions, ethnicity, relationships, or internal debate. Each person in the class chose his or her own informant network, made up of three or four members of the CMU community expected to make helpful contributions to our research.

We were careful to conduct our interviews in such a way that we could extract *critical incidents* from each informant. A critical incident is a particular situation in an interviewee's experience in which he or she is in a position where there is a problem at hand. Critical incidents are useful because they help avoid generalizations about interactions on campus and invite different interpretations of an informant's experience.

The critical incidents for each network were available to the entire class to read. We scanned the critical incidents for situations that had to do specifically with internal conflicts relating to identity. It was at this point that we narrowed our focus to a more specific issue: religious identity. What factors determine how serious a person is about religion? We noticed that many students make new choices with regard to religion during their years at CMU. Our central question was this: what are the influences on these decisions and how significant are they? More importantly, what kinds of internal conflicts do these influences create? Our research provided us with a diverse set of perspectives on this question.

We recognize that there is no singular “CMU experience.” Thus, it is impossible to come up with a universal answer to our question. We also recognize that our research may not constitute a representative sample of the undergraduate body at Carnegie Mellon. However, we still feel that our research offers valuable insights into student life at CMU. Given the presence of religious communities on campus and similarities between critical incidents, we know that the experiences of our informants are not unique.

The purpose of our research was not only to answer the above question, but also to better understand the potential causes of the challenges many CMU students face when deciding what religion means to them. This topic was also of personal interest to us given that prior to this inquiry, religion had received less consideration than topics such as race and ethnicity in our course work.

Religious Identity: A Definition

“Identity” is an often-used term that is seldom defined. In *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Dorothy Holland et al. write, “People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities” (Holland et al. 3). Taking this definition as our starting point, how would we define religious identity? In the context of this report, “religious identity” refers to people’s ways of relating to religion, including whether they choose to belong to a religious community, how strongly they feel about their beliefs, and how they choose to demonstrate those beliefs in their daily lives. All of these choices and values make statements about who people understand themselves to be. The term “religious identity formation” will be used to denote the process by which people decide what their relationship to religion will be.

External Influences on Religious Identity Formation / Critical Incidents

In collecting and reading critical incidents related to our topic, we discovered that the conflicts related to identity-making are not solely internal. Rather, these conflicts arise from various external pressures. Although when we chose our topic we had originally intended on focusing only on the internal struggles one goes through, we found that it was not possible to accurately

identify and address identity problems related to religion without first going into depth about what types of external factors cause the internal conflicts we discovered in the critical incidents.

The most prominent of these factors we encountered in our research was how one responds to his or her peers. We found that many of the internal conflicts people have over religion and the decisions they make are heavily influenced by the people they socialize with. One student at Carnegie Mellon we read about, named “Brian” (this is simply a pseudonym, as are all names of people mentioned from critical incidents in order to protect their identity), is a Caucasian, Christian, electrical engineering major. Brian came to CMU eager to discuss his religion with others, as his identity stems from him being a Christian and engaging in discussion with others about Christianity. However, as the student body at CMU includes members of many different cultures and religions, Brian found that talking to the average student about Christianity was no easy task. He felt uncomfortable talking to people from other cultures about religion because he didn't feel he could communicate with them about such a personal topic; yet, he felt conflicted because he wanted to uphold his responsibility to try and spread his faith to others.

Another external factor we found to be significant in raising religious identity problems is the hometown environment a student grew up in. Those raised in a community or society where a particular religion is prominent amongst the people are likely to encounter a situation where their faith is put into question when entering an environment with a heterogeneous mix of cultures and religion. A Muslim student we interviewed, named Ali, had this experience when coming to CMU. A citizen of Malaysia, Ali has been exposed to Islam his whole life. For him, Islam was not just a part of his life; it was a way of life. When he first came to America, the strict religious principles he lived by were a major conversation point for him. Ali would debate and argue with others about why Islam was important to him and why the word of the Koran is the word everyone should live by. Soon, though, he found that he began to adapt to a more “American” way of thought. As he debated with others, he began to wonder if Islam was right for everyone. Ali eventually became less and less devout; he wouldn't pray as frequently and spent less time reading the Koran. Islam is still very much an important part of Ali's life, but he now has doubts about the absoluteness of its teachings.

We also saw in some critical incidents that people's everyday priorities may shift when coming to college. This change may come about from the fact that for many students, coming to

college means new responsibilities and a chance to think more freely. We interviewed another Muslim international student, Abdu'r, who is from the Islamic nation of Oman. Although he practiced his faith daily when in Oman, Abdu'r's priorities began to slowly change when he came to CMU. He became more and more concerned with spending time with friends, doing his work, and enjoying the various excesses offered by American society, and less time practicing his religion. When he returned home to Oman, he fell back into his old routine. Abdu'r realized, though, that this was just because he was forced into such a routine; he had to be a faithful Muslim while in Oman. He began to question just how important his religion was to him, and admits now that he doesn't think it means as much to him as he once thought, since it is no longer as much a priority for him.

Although we didn't find a particularly strong example, we believe that on-campus religious organizations are also a source for internal conflict about religious identity formation at CMU. That these organizations may play a large roll in religious identity formation is only natural, as they provide an environment ripe for discussion and debate. In one critical incident, an international electrical engineering major named Dave said he felt that visiting such groups helped him think about topics in politics and religion that he would have never addressed on his own.

Narrative

After analyzing the class's critical incidents and identifying key influences on religious identity formation, our next task was to write a narrative that would evoke different responses from readers and cause them to reflect on the questions we sought to answer. This narrative was based on our own interpretations of the internal conflicts we had seen in the critical incidents. The narrative, which is divided into three scenarios and prefaced by the questions we asked our readers (mostly members of our network) to answer, is included below.

Narrative on Religious Identity at CMU

Questions to bear in mind while reading:

What are the factors that determine how serious someone is about religion?

How does religion affect one's decision making process in the face of outside pressures?

Do you think these scenarios would actually happen?

What do you think is the basic problem here, and what do you think causes it?

Scenario 1

Joe is a devout Christian. He is from a small suburban, mostly Caucasian community. He is a freshman at Carnegie Mellon. He lives on campus, in a dorm.

Joe's roommate, Rob, is from Toronto. He is agnostic; religion has never played an important role in his life.

Rob and his long-term girlfriend from back home have broken up because of long-distance troubles. Rob is also suffering from financial troubles; his parents are unsure if they will be able to pay to send him back to Carnegie Mellon next year. Rob may have to take out an even larger student loan. Joe notices that Rob is seeming depressed and lonely.

Dialogue

(Rob enters the dorm room, Joe is at his desk, checking email)

Joe: Hey, what's up? Just got back from lunch?

Rob: Yeah, with a couple of guys from class. We were kind of also studying for the test on Wednesday while eating. Man, I am so stressed out!

Joe: Cause of the test?

Rob: Well, everything. Class. Breaking up with Chrissy. Not having enough money to pay for college. Everything! The other guys just don't understand, either. I feel like I can't talk to them sometimes.

Joe: I'm sure they try to understand. They probably just get preoccupied with their work and stuff.

Rob: Yeah, I guess.

Joe: Hey, there's no need to feel alone, okay? You wanna come to church with me Sunday Morning? It's really fun, there's a lot of young people there. Maybe you could find more people that you can relate to.

Rob: Yeah, maybe. I don't know.

Joe: Really, come on. You're always welcome to come.

Rob: I don't think so.

Joe: Well, how do you expect God to help you if you won't give your time to him?

Rob: Whatever, man. I can't believe you're trying to force that on me right now, anyway. I'm really stressed out right now.

(Rob grabs his backpack and walks out of the room)

After this encounter, there is some tension between the two roommates for a few days. Rob feels that he never asked for Joe's help or advice, especially if it had to do with spiritual guidance. He only wanted Joe to lend him a listening ear. Joe feels bad for having pushed Rob into going to Church. He wonders if he went too far, but he also feels so strongly about his religion that he wants to share Christianity with everyone. For him, when he needs help, he seeks the Lord. He thought this might have been able to help Rob reduce his stress level or his feelings of depression. Joe is left wondering whether it is right to share his religion with others.

Scenario 2

“Man, you can’t even walk straight.”

“Of course I can, watch this!”

Steve attempted to walk in a straight line across the room as if he were on a balance beam, but managed to lose his balance halfway and fall to the floor.

The room burst out with laughter. Even Ahmed had to admit it was pretty funny, but he couldn’t enjoy it like everyone else. Ever since he was a small child, his parents, and in fact all the respectable adults in his community, had told him that drinking was wrong, and can lead to a godless life. So he pretended that everything was okay, because he recognized that he was in a foreign country, but he knew that had a group of his friends been drinking at home, he would have immediately confronted them about it.

“Hey, grab me another beer,” Jason said. Ahmed watched Jason walk to his side of the room. “Man, Steve is so wasted...it’s great—I hardly ever see him like this,” said Jason to his girlfriend.

His girlfriend, still distracted by the lively conversation, heard Jason’s words a few seconds late, then replied, “Well, you’re not so sober yourself, Jason.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone in this room who can claim to be totally sober,” said Jason. He turned to Ahmed: “Hey, you want another beer? I can get you one.”

“No thanks,” said Ahmed. After a short hesitation, he added, “I don’t drink.”

“Are you serious?” Jason said, “I didn’t think anyone actually stayed sober all through college, although a lot of people say they will.”

“Well, it’s true; drinking is against my religion, so I don’t drink,” Ahmed answered. He felt satisfied to have “put in a good word,” as they would say here, for Allah. He had debated about saying it when Jason first offered him the drink, but had decided that it was better not to look too much like he was pushing his religion. He was glad for this chance to explain his reasons.

“Well, if you ever want to start drinking, college is a great time,” Jason suggested.

“No, really,” Ahmed replied.

“It’s not going to kill you,” Jason persisted.

“Actually it might.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Alcohol is like a poison to you; that is why Allah forbids it. That and the overall effect that drinking has on a society,” Ahmed explained.

“Well, I think Allah ought to knock one back once in a while; take a chill pill,” Jason said. “I mean, why’s He got to be so up-tight about everything? You look like you could use a little loosening up too—why don’t you have one? Just one beer?”

“Look, I’m not interested, and I don’t appreciate your insulting my religion,” said Ahmed, visibly agitated.

“Who’s insulting your religion? God, take it easy, man.”

“Maybe you should take it easy and leave me alone about having a beer.”

“Well it might do you some good,” Jason said.

“I don’t think so,” Ahmed said firmly. “I’m going to get a drink of water.”

Ahmed wasn’t even thirsty. He stood in next to the water fountain and thought about how difficult it was sometimes being a Muslim in America. It wasn’t just the way he was

perceived; it was also the way he was always being forced to explain himself. People here just weren't satisfied with the answer, "it's in the Koran." Sure, there were reasons for everything, but he didn't have to think about them very much before coming to CMU. He never drank or smoked, or thought of being unfaithful to his fiancé, and he still didn't, but now he began asking why he believed what he did. Moreover, he was no longer sure that were he to fully understand the reasons, he would agree with all of them. He felt a little guilty for questioning. What would his parents think? Or his Muslim friends? He couldn't stand the thought of being called an apostate*.

He still felt strongly about not drinking, and most of his personal choices, but he was no longer so certain about how to share his religion with others. He wondered if confronting everyone who disobeyed the Koran, as the *ulama*** encouraged, was really the best approach. If he condemned all his friends for drinking, they would all hate him. Converting to Islam would be the last thing they would do.

He thought about how he had changed since his freshman year. He used to stop whatever he was doing at certain times to pray. Now he would sometimes delay his prayers, which often meant that he would only pray three times a day, down from four or five his earlier years. He had also grown past his nervousness of looking upon the faces of female students. He realized that obsessing about this rule simply wasn't practical; the women here were not veiled, and one has to interact from time to time. He no longer read the Koran every week; after all, he could always go back and read it after doing his homework or seeing friends, right? But he never had time for it except on weekends.

How could he promote his religion when he wasn't even practicing it the way he should be? He wondered if he had made the right choices.

* One who renounces his religion or seriously questions it

** Term in Islam meaning the community of learned men responsible for guiding both the people and the rulers according to religious teachings

Scenario 3

Emily is a Jewish girl who is in the spring semester of her freshman year at Carnegie Mellon. She comes from a household with a relatively strong Jewish upbringing, and celebrates Jewish holidays with her family and community. Emily has noticed, however, that many people at CMU aren't very religious. When she came to Carnegie Mellon, she tried to affiliate herself with official on-campus Jewish organizations and would try to spend time with people in said organizations (i.e., getting dinner together). A rather diligent student, Emily found herself spending a lot of time in her dorm room doing her work, and thus ended up hanging out with people in her dorm during her spare time. As the only practicing Jew on her floor, she found herself participating in fewer and fewer social events that place an emphasis on Judaism. Much of her time was spent doing work or going out with friends on her floor, and less of it spent practicing her religion (i.e., regularly going to temple).

When she returned home for spring break, Emily found herself thrust back into an environment where her religion is a much larger factor in the lives of the people in the community. Upon coming home, Emily's family cooked her a kosher dinner. She spent her next Friday night and Saturday morning at temple with her family, going for the first time since she was last home. Coming back home made Emily realize that religion doesn't

play as large a roll in her life at school as it does at home. At school, she never made the decision not to practice her religion, but she made many small decisions through the course of the year that lead her astray from it. Emily began to wonder if her religion is as important to her as she once thought it was. She felt it was an important part of who she was, as she grew up embracing religion, but she was no longer sure that it was as important, as she now valued other uses of her time.

In many cases, as demonstrated in the narrative, influences on religious identity formation are not just influences, but pressures. The characters are faced with difficult questions: Should I allow other people's opinions to make me question my beliefs? Should I try to promote my religion to others? Should religion still be one of my top priorities in the absence of a community that strongly supports it, and when I have so many other commitments that are important to me (sports, clubs, etc.)?

Each of these decision points is an example of an internal conflict instigated by outside pressures. Although each character is acting as an individual, shaping his or her own religious identity, the decisions being made are clearly influenced by some of the factors outlined above—particularly peers, family, and the culture of one's home town. At the same time, the internal debate surrounding religion may continue even when a person decides they are going to ignore the perceptions of the outside world (perhaps this is why we originally thought of religious identity as an internal issue). Although we recognize this as a possibility, in all of the cases we have seen, the perceptions of others are still the primary source of internal conflict.

Why are the opinions and perceptions of others so important? Is intolerance part of the problem? If so, who is being intolerant of whom? Is individuality being threatened or encouraged by the way people are sometimes forced to defend their beliefs? There are many different responses to these questions.

Differing Perspectives on Religious Identity

Because we were attempting to analyze a very intricate and complex question about identity-making at CMU with regard to religion, it was important that we extend our research to outside sources, in addition to our original critical incidents. Throughout our semester in Talking Across Differences, we read accounts discussing the issue of identity-making. Of these, a few directly discussed factors that alter one's religious identity and how these factors create internal conflict.

Putting these readings in direct dialogue with our inquiry, we were able to come up with a more well-rounded view of how one's views are changed when faced with a conflict surrounding his or her religious beliefs. Because it is difficult to come up with a generalized theory about religious identity formation at CMU using only the critical incidents available from the class, these readings helped to shade in the patterns that we already saw forming. In addition to the readings from the class, we also gave great consideration to feedback from our peers with regard to our narrative. Using the readings from Gloria Anzaldúa, Bellah, and the responses from our networks with regard to our narrative, we were able to come up with more concrete ideas about our questions.

In her book, *Borderlands La Frontera*, Anzaldúa's main focus is in fact identity-making as a *mestiza* (a person of mixed heritage). Religion plays a large role in her identity; however, her religion is difficult to define. She states: "My family, like most Chicanos, did not practice Roman Catholicism but a folk Catholicism with many pagan elements" (Anzaldúa 49). The importance of this statement is to point out that Anzaldúa was able to be religious without conforming to the rules of religion. Her family was able to put Roman Catholicism into question, see where they thought it was flawed, and believe their own version. She was able to keep religion dear to her, but did not follow it blindly; in fact, she disdains the idea of institutionalized religion. She also discusses the idea of *facultad*, where one deems religion an ever greater aspect of one's identity because one has fought to keep it. Anyone who has had their religion questioned, she says, will come out even more religious than before: "Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest," she says (Anzaldúa 60). This is an idea that also appeared in our discussions with our networks.

In *Habits of the Heart* by Bellah et al., we came across the idea of adolescents, an age group that can be specifically identified with the CMU undergraduate community, needing to put their religion into question. In the section called "Leaving Church," Bellah et al. say that at some point in adolescence or early youth, one will either decide to break away from the religion that one has grown up with or will continue to belong to the church of one's parents. "But the expectation is that ... one will decide on one's own that that is the church to belong to" (Bellah et al. 62). That is, if a teenager decides to continue to follow the religion he or she has been brought up with, it is often not a blind following. A teenager does not have views on the world

simply because those were the views of his or her parents; instead, his or her views “must be particularly and peculiarly one’s own” (Bellah et al. 63).

Our networks of informants gave similar responses to those of Anzaldúa and Bellah. Many did not see the presence of internal conflict as negative. One, Joy, stated “I think the more someone has been challenged about their religion, the more serious they will be ... if you’ve got to fight for it, if you’ve got to make an effort to stick with it, then you will come out stronger, more attached to it.” None of the informants seemed to view the CMU environment as potentially detrimental in the long run to one’s religion, which was somewhat surprising. Joy, for example, pointed out that the problem may lie in human nature, which she doesn’t think should be changed. Misunderstandings will inevitably arise in life. One reader even suggested giving up religion for a full year. He explained this as a way to find out if “religion is truly an integral part of themselves or if it’s just something they have accepted without knowing if they need it or not.”

The other responses were not nearly so extreme, but all seemed to recognize the clash that came about from having to adjust to a new community away from home. One individual from our networks, Vejay, said of Ahmed’s situation that he “is being forced to perhaps subconsciously question some of his own beliefs.” Although Vejay singled this out as what he saw occurring in Ahmed’s narrative, he never stated that it was specifically a problem. Vejay simply reiterated his opinion that while at college, one’s views about religion often change because one is being exposed to differing mindsets and is out of the community where familiar ideas are reinforced.

In singling out one problem of coming to the Carnegie Mellon and having one’s religious beliefs be put into question, there was not one single answer. Whereas Joy said that the problem is human nature and we should not try to change it, another informant, Pif, said that the problem may be in these people being overly sensitive; perhaps Rob was overly insulted by his roommate’s encouragement to join a church group. Another informant, Sammy, stated that the problem lies directly in the external pressures of one’s friends or family. He stated that the care a person may receive “turns into pressure” which would generally “cause the opposite of the desired effect on the person.” This, then, is implying that religion should be much more of an internal search than an external one. One last informant, Craig, stated that he didn’t see a devout person questioning his or her faith as a problem: “If their faith holds up under this pressure, then

they are stronger in their faiths than before.” If their views change, he sees that as fine, also. The only problem he could identify was perhaps with a problem in tolerance, for example that of Rob’s roommate, or Ahmed’s floor mate. In such a case, he believes that CMU is not the right place for him, because it is such a multicultural university. With the responses so numerous and varied, it was difficult deciding what we viewed as the underlying problem across the different critical incidents and narratives.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of our research, we sought to determine both the external and internal causes of the challenges CMU students face with regard to religion. Although we expected to focus on the internal causes, our inquiry took a different turn. We discovered that the internal struggles involved in identity making could not be separated from the external influences that instigate them. These influences are significant enough and create enough difficulties that they could be called problematic.

If there is a problem, what is it? One hypothesis is that the problem is the limitations many felt in being able to express their religious identities. Joe, from the narrative, faced this problem. Because of the reaction of his roommate, he felt inhibited in promoting his religion the way he believed he should. He was worried that he would strain the relationship between him and his roommate. A rival hypothesis is that the problem would lie in Joe’s blindly following what his religion dictated to him without ever having to defend or question it. Many of our informants agreed with this second hypothesis. They believed that questioning one’s own religion, which one often does when it is challenged by others, is not only healthy, but can even strengthen one’s faith.

The case of the student for whom religion becomes less important presents another potential problem. Do people allow their priorities to shift too easily, based only on the religious sentiment of the majority? For example, Emily, from the narrative, was a devout Jew at home simply because that was the expectation of her family and community. When she came to CMU, her decision to stop practicing her religion came about in the absence of that expectation. On the other hand, perhaps shifting priorities are a positive sign of individualism. This flexibility allows, in the case of people like Emily, an opportunity for growth beyond religious ambivalence, i.e. unquestioningly practicing the religion of one’s parents.

Although there is no right or wrong way to identify the problem for this inquiry, we feel that these problems were representative of the most prevalent challenges faced by CMU students with regard to religion. Given the complexity of these problems and the differing perspectives on what the problems are to begin with, it would be impossible to come up with a single solution. Our goal, however, was not to name a central problem and find a solution for it. Our goal was to seek out as many different ideas about religious identity formation and the problems associated with it as possible. Thanks to the many contributors to our research, we were able to do exactly that.

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