

PLURALISM IN PRACTICE

*Case Studies of Leadership
in a Religiously Diverse America*

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Introduction

A decision-based case study is an invitation to engage. The cases in this volume are adaptations of a particular form of case study from professional education contexts. While many may understand a “case study” as an example or narrative, decision-based cases are also a method of teaching and learning. As Boehrer and Linsky helpfully suggest, “The relationship between the artifact of a case and its functional purpose is a crucial aspect of the case method. To grasp this, it is useful to think of a case in several ways: as a document or text, as a story, as a vehicle for discussion, and as an event.”¹

As documents or texts, the cases in this volume may provide micro-histories of a dispute; as stories, they are told by a protagonist from their own perspective and location; as a vehicle for discussion (and reflection), they are structured around an actionable problem; as an event, each case discussion brings out unique observations, drawn from the participants. The participant-centered aspect of the case method cannot be overstated: the reader, or discussion participant, is challenged to read closely and empathetically, to reflect, to ask questions, and to come up with constructive answers to the dilemmas on the page.

Most of the cases in this volume are field cases, based on extensive research and interviews; only one, “Fliers at the Peace Parade,” is a “library case,” drawn from secondary research. As decision-based cases, they all have competing values, tension, and complexity; the case decisions are actionable, rather than abstract. The brief (A) case introduces the *problem*, the *place*, and a *person* (or people) confronted with a decision. We pause at the end of the (A) case—the point of decision—to ask additional questions and to reflect. Any analysis included in the case is that of the protagonist: in format and structure, the decision-based case creates space for analysis and critical thinking.

¹ John Boehrer and Marty Linsky, “Teaching with Cases: Learning to Question,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 42 (1990): 44.

Cases are incomplete both by necessity and by design. Yet in a case of any length, the discussion questions are similar. Based on the case narrative: What does the protagonist know? What does the protagonist need to know in order to solve the problem? As you consider how the protagonist might gather additional information, resources, or perspectives, consider how *you* would do so—whether as the protagonist or from your own location. What solutions might you suggest, based on the information in the case?

Protagonists and the Practice of Pluralism

Case studies focus on one primary point of view, a “protagonist,” reminding us that there are real stakes and real people at the heart of any of these dilemmas or discussions of diversity. Each expresses a specific, situated point of view, grounded in their experience. While these stories are necessarily mediated by me as an interviewer and case writer, field cases are closely reviewed by the protagonist for accuracy—and to be sure they resonate closely with their personal experience.

As each protagonist determines a path forward, the reader is invited to join them, briefly inhabit their perspective, consider how they might respond, and then articulate their own point of view. The reader is encouraged to think critically about the problem, how it was handled, and what the protagonist may have missed. I would encourage you to bring empathy as you read these stories, recognizing that many of these decisions are made with the constraints of time, the confounding factor of limited information, and the complication of human frailty. Unlike you, who are reading these cases from relative comfort and distance, they didn’t have the chance to practice with these dilemmas in advance.

For those who argue that these protagonists are sometimes treated as “heroes” in these case studies, I would agree. Please consider this: it is my intention to tell these stories from the protagonist’s point of view, as it was happening for them at the time—and we are all the heroes of our own stories. Each case, in its own way, also suggests some of the blind spots and unanticipated elements: if they are heroes, they are certainly humble ones. As readers and discussants of these cases, we might bring the same sense of humility to the people—and the problem(s)—on the page.

Inhabiting these cases from the perspective of the protagonist enables us to move beyond simplistic criticism to complex problem-solving. It

also helps each of us to practice pluralism: to understand that we, too, may be confronted by difficult decisions and complex dilemmas; we may experience—in relationship with ourselves or others—conflicting values and divergent truth claims. Cases help us to practice solving problems and confronting dilemmas. As we engage with cases, we practice forming and articulating our point of view; we also practice listening carefully, respecting other people's stories, and recognizing when we need to pause or seek additional information. I hope, as we practice pluralism through the case method, we might build some of the skills and capacities needed for living in our diverse society.

The Structure of This Volume

Pluralism in Practice includes the full text of twelve case studies, paired thematically as companion cases. It includes three more recent cases: “A Festival of Faiths,” “A Quandary in Queens,” and “Forty-Nine Days.”

Each case opens with a brief scenario—a streamlined version of the problem—which serves as an introduction to the case text. These opening scenarios may also be utilized for discussion contexts with more limited time. Most of the cases in this collection are told in two parts: the (A) case brings thick description and detail to each dilemma and ends at the point of decision. This decision point structures the narrative, generates reflection, and energizes discussion as the reader pauses to consider an additional set of questions. Next, the (B) case describes how the decision or dilemma was resolved.

After each case appears a postscript or update on the dilemmas and controversies that served as the basis of these cases—both to underscore the changing nature and unseen aspects of these controversies, and to encourage readers to continue to follow these ongoing issues and unfolding stories.

The first part of the book, “Constructing Religious Diversity,” approaches the display of religion in the public square: “The Christmas Tree Crisis at Sea-Tac Airport,” about a contested holiday display at the airport, suggests the challenges of constructing a religiously diverse society. In “A Festival of Faiths,” curators plan a large-scale festival of religion on the National Mall. Like its companion case, a working group is asked to consult on how to curate the complex, contested multireligious reality of religions in America—and how to think about lived religion.

The second part, “Religion in the American City,” continues our exploration of religious diversity through two dilemmas in Michigan cities. “Trouble in Troy” follows one city’s path toward inclusion of Hindu voices, and challenges to the presumptive Judeo-Christian identity, with the National Day of Prayer observance; “A Call to Prayer” looks at the controversy over the broadcast of the Muslim call to prayer in a town transforming from majority Polish to majority Muslim.

From the broader context of the American city, we move to thematic sections. In Part 3, “Fault Lines in Interfaith Relations,” we explore some of the intractable divides in grassroots interfaith efforts: the issue of Israel/Palestine, in “A Sign of Division,” and the question of proselytization, as documented in “Fliers at the Peace Parade.”

A thirteen-story Muslim community center in Manhattan may have little in common with the adaptive reuse of a church in a bedroom community of Chicago, yet both mosques face fierce opposition. In Part 4, “Mosques in the American Landscape,” a Christian mayor and a Muslim community leader must each draw upon their respective faiths, and their inner resolve, as they navigate complex, charged disputes in “A Mosque in Palos Heights” and “Center of Dispute.”

Part 5 explores interfaith and multifaith challenges through a Jewish lens. A rabbi called to host an interfaith event in the wake of the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in “Showing Up for Shabbat” considers what “safety” means for the Jewish community and whether interfaith events are always appropriate. “A Question of Membership” explores multifaith identity through a request from a Buddhist leader to join her local synagogue.

The final part, “Navigating Crisis and Change,” looks at two young leaders who must contend with community challenges: a first-generation Hindu American and community organizer faces issues, in “A Quandary in Queens,” and Asian American Buddhists respond to anti-Asian violence in “Forty-Nine Days.”

At the end of the book, Diana Eck offers some suggestions for reading and discussing cases in her afterword, “A Pedagogy of Pluralism.”

A Postscript on Pluralism

The cases in this collection were developed over a period of more than fifteen years, with incidents taking place from the late 1990s to 2022. The postscripts, brief updates to each case, are drawn from more recent

research and follow-up interviews. Here we ask questions including, How has the issue played out since the case was written? Has the protagonist's view changed over time? Would they offer any new reflections on leadership, or a new perspective on the existing case? Were there any unanticipated consequences? Or, in a few cases, might a postscript fill in what was missing from the original case?

Readers might do their own research on what happened after the case was resolved or read more about the city, the organization, or the individuals in the case; however, much might be overlooked or misunderstood doing a cursory Google search. Rarely in media coverage of a zoning battle, a difficult public decision, or a community dispute do we learn what happens in the aftermath. Much that unfolds does not become a matter of public record, and some of the assumptions we might make based on public sources—including my own, before speaking with people on the ground—may prove to be incorrect.

In most cases, these postscripts continue to center the voice and perspective of the protagonist; however, some include new voices. The postscript for “A Mosque in Palos Heights” integrates the voice of a minor character from the first case, Edward Hassan; “Fliers at the Peace Parade” expands the perspective to include a more prominent Sikh voice.

While this volume takes a longitudinal view on conflicts related to religious diversity and interfaith relations, these stories are ongoing, with impacts—and our interpretations—changing over time. Each case study and its postscripts are, in themselves, snapshots of a specific moment in time. This volume, accordingly, captures something of the current moment: it is not the same hopeful moment Diana Eck documented in *A New Religious America*. She wrote of a changing landscape, with emerging institutions and relationships, as well as some emerging challenges—but charged with a sense of possibility.

The mood here, as expressed by the protagonists in the postscripts, is decidedly darker: with follow-up interviews conducted in the midst of COVID-19, they describe a polarized political (and media) landscape, express concerns about the future of democracy, detail rising hate crimes against communities minoritized by race and religion, and chronicle the ongoing, seemingly intractable challenges of working across difference. In some cases, it becomes clear that their efforts—to build, repair, and reimagine—have not borne fruit. Yet the work continues.

Despite these stark realities, there are signs of hope in these post-scripts: an interfaith organization, formed out of crisis, still active twenty years later; a protagonist who didn't see her dream community center realized, yet has begun planning a new center; the leader refused membership to a religious community because of her dual religious identity who, years later, is welcomed. There is persistence to the practice of pluralism and, with it, a progressive vision for the future. There are also lessons here, common to these stories and evident to me as an observer and researcher of interfaith civic life: that having relationships in place before a crisis is critical; that effective leadership requires an ability to listen to other points of view—and to clearly articulate not only a vision but a plan; that we often can't avoid or anticipate crises, but we can learn from how others respond; and that constructive efforts require regular maintenance and constant cultivation.

One of our early cases, written by Marcia Sietstra, tells the story of the founding of the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha, Nebraska: here, a synagogue, mosque, and church chose to build side by side. In more recent years, they established an orchard called "Hope" on the thirty-eight-acre campus. Right now, Hope isn't thriving. Fruit trees take many years after planting before they can be harvested; the volunteers who tend to the trees recognize that the particular siting and soil conditions may not be ideal for the orchard to thrive, but they continue to search for solutions. Other aspects of the larger, aspirational Tri-Faith project are flourishing: the three communities constructed landmark religious centers—and an interfaith center—and have built programs for education, intentional relationship, and ongoing collaboration.

From the initial vision in the early 2000s to the vital thirty-eight-acre campus today, Tri-Faith understands itself as a new model of relationship, but also as a work in progress. It is a place of daily effort and ongoing cultivation, made visible in Tri-Faith's struggling orchard, but also in their vast, productive organic donation garden. Recently, Tri-Faith volunteers donated more than five thousand 5,000 pounds of produce to people in need across Omaha. The garden and orchard weren't part of the original plan for Tri-Faith, nor was the beautiful circular wooden bridge that connects the buildings: these ideas, like some of the new challenges facing Tri-Faith, have emerged over time. Will Tri-Faith become a model for other communities? How will they contend with increasing division—and rising hate crimes? Will they expand to invite other faiths? Will

Tri-Faith have relevance for an increasingly unaffiliated next generation? Will “Hope” survive—the orchard or the aspiration? Tri-Faith’s visionary, Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, has something to say about this:

Sometimes we need to stop using the word hope and actually try to effectuate, and change, and create the hope ourselves. There will be moments of rough coexistence. So what? We are responsible to continue this for the next generation, even if it is hard—even if there are obstacles. And there will be obstacles.²

This book documents some of the obstacles and difficulties of our multifaith reality in the United States, making clear the very real challenges that decision-makers face, as well as the deepening divides. This volume provides cautionary tales but also offers powerful examples of response and repair. Each case highlights one or more critical, constructive, and creative responses—of pluralism in practice—as tools for education, and perhaps, as a source of inspiration.

² Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, interview with the author, October 10, 2021.