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Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Diversity on Campus: Book Review of Goodman, Giess and Patel (2019) *Educating about religious diversity and interfaith engagement*

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Book Review

Goodman, K.M., Giess, M.E., & Patel, E (2019). *Educating about religious diversity and interfaith engagement: A handbook for student affairs*. Stylus Publishing.

318 pages. Available in hardback (\$125), paperback and digital format (\$35)

Keywords: religious diversity, secular students, interfaith

Students come to college as individuals with multi-faceted identities, making each college campus a unique mosaic of many types of diversity. At the same time, “who is a minority and what is diversity can be different for every college” (Mutakabbir & Nuriddin, 2016, p. 54). In efforts to make their campus more welcoming to students of all backgrounds, university faculty, staff, and administrators may read books and participate in trainings designed to help them better meet the academic, social, and psychological needs of all students. However, it has been my experience that some identity topics, such as race and ethnic background, tend to be more widely discussed than others. One of the areas often overlooked in staff and faculty trainings on college campuses is diversity in religious and philosophical worldviews (Patel, 2007). It is this topic that Goodman, Giess, and Patel aim to address with their book *Educating about religious diversity and interfaith engagement: A handbook for student affairs*. While the subtitle targets a specific segment of university personnel, this book offers much to ponder for faculty and administration as well as staff.

One of the book's notable strengths is its highly qualified team of editors. Goodman holds a doctorate in education and has served in a faculty position in the field of educational leadership and student affairs. Giess, with a master's degree in theological studies, has served in leadership roles in several organizations and initiatives promoting interfaith engagement and collaboration. Patel earned a doctorate in the sociology of religion, founded Interfaith Youth Core (www.ifyc.org), and served on the Faith Council in the Obama administration. He has written multiple books on interfaith topics.

These three editors collaborated with a group of contributors representing a wide range of professional roles in higher education, including student affairs staff, faculty members, administrators, chaplains, and leaders of student-focused local and national organizations. The result is a book filled with practical examples of how to broaden religious understanding and promote interfaith engagement on university campuses in various contexts, including academic courses, residence life, student programming, and more.

An important shortcoming of the book is its lack of stated theoretical orientation. While its subtitle of handbook supports its focus on practical application, the work is rooted in certain theories of learning, even if unacknowledged. In the foreword, the term "holistic student development" is mentioned, while the introduction features the expression "the whole identity of the person". These concepts have been featured in the higher education literature since the 1960s, for example by Sanford (1962) and Checkering (1969), and countless others since. As a component of holistic student development, cultural competence is a key concept mentioned or implied in many of the chapters, with interreligious engagement variously cast as a vehicle for the development of cultural competence (for example, in chapters 8 and 9) and other times as a hallmark of cultural competence (for example, in chapters 3 and 14).

The book starts out with an overview chapter and a general section (Part 1: Context), in which readers are introduced to terminology and key findings in the area of religious, secular, and spiritual (RSS) diversity among college students. In this section, chapter 2 introduces two key instruments that have been used in recent years for assessing RSS diversity on university campuses in the US. The Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey was administered in 2011-2015 on many campuses around the country to more than 16,450 students total (Interfaith Youth Core, n.d.), while the Interfaith Diversity and Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS) is a multi-part survey that was administered at 122 colleges and universities to thousands of students in their first year (Fall 2015) and again in their fourth year (Spring 2019) in college. Two of the chapter's authors, Rockenbach and Mayhew, have co-published multiple scholarly reports on the findings of these surveys.

Following the establishment of a general framework for thinking about RSS diversity on campus in Part 1, the next three sections contain examples of ideas, programs, and outcomes

on specific college campuses, written by authors who focus on lessons learned from engagement with RSS diversity in their respective settings. Part 2 (Teaching Ideas) and Part 3 (Strategies and Activities) are directed at instructors who teach academic courses as well as those who facilitate non-credit workshops. Part 4 offers recommendations for using case studies to engage students with problem-solving around issues related to RSS diversity. The last section of the book, Part 5, summarizes foundational knowledge and perspectives pertaining to specific RSS worldviews. Written by insiders of various traditions for the benefit of outsiders, this part of the book contains relevant insights from personal experience. The Christian, Muslim, and Jewish traditions each have their own chapter. In addition to a brief description of the basic tenets of the tradition, each chapter offers readers a nuanced view of the internal diversity within the tradition, highlighting areas of tension and debate on such matters as ethics, scriptural authority, views on family and gender, and so forth. These three chapters are followed by a section titled “Understanding secular students on campus” (chapter 18), in which the discussion of stereotypes was especially helpful to me. My greatest disappointment with the book is its final chapter, “Understanding Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu students on campus” (chapter 19), which lumps together multiple uniquely rich and important traditions yet takes up barely 14 pages. The authors state in the first paragraph that “Eastern religions can often look quite different from Western traditions. Concepts and practices do not always adhere to culturally Western assumptions about religion” (p. 275). This is precisely why it is inexcusable that the editors devoted so little space to traditions that can be particularly challenging to understand and appreciate by people whose experience with RSS diversity has been limited to Abrahamic traditions. The experience of Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu students on campuses in the USA is fundamentally shaped by the ignorance they encounter routinely in academic, social, and public settings. At least the chapter’s authors offer a list of websites and references that readers can use to educate themselves further. I look forward to the publication of detailed studies on the university experiences of Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and other lesser-known groups.

In all, *Educating about religious diversity and interfaith engagement* makes a valuable contribution to the professional development of higher education personnel. Authors who wrote from their own experiences make this an authentic read with valuable lessons and actionable ideas. Whether we consider ourselves staff, faculty, or administration, the perspectives on RSS diversity offered by Goodman, Giess, and Patel are likely to help us see our students and ourselves in new ways. As such, this book helps us not only in professional development but also in personal growth.

Irrespective of a college’s foundation as religiously affiliated or public, its students will certainly represent RSS diversity. If we ignore this diversity and the opportunities it affords for encounter and exploration, we do not equip ourselves or our students for professional

collaboration and civic engagement (Clingerman & Locklin, 2016). Just as students do not shed other aspects of their identities, such as ethnic background, first language, gender identity, or sexual orientation, when they come to campus, they do not discard their RSS worldviews when they join our campus community. An important first step in preparing ourselves to better encounter RSS diversity is to acknowledge that we can do better and need to learn how. As Giess states, “it is incumbent on educators to start with themselves in gaining foundational knowledge about the religious diversity present on our campuses” (p. 201). This book offers many ideas for getting started individually and collectively. Rather than remaining stuck in ignorance and avoidance, we can move in the direction of awareness, appreciation, and advocacy.

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