Second Annual Living the American Jewish Experience Lecture

JEWS HAVE NEVER LIVED IN A VACUUM

Interreligious Engagement and the American Jewish Experience

Thursday, January 8, 2026 | 7-9 PM

Featuring

Dr. Dean P. Bell

President and CEO of the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership

This annual free lecture is generously funded by Marcia & Barry Silverberg

Dessert reception following lecture

SHALOM AUSTIN

Dean Philip Bell is the 9th President and CEO of the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership. He is a distinguished scholar and practitioner who brought a unique blend of academic rigor, leadership expertise, and consulting experience to the topic he addressed.

Dr. Bell is a prolific historian focusing increasingly on interreligious dialogue, climate change and natural disasters including pandemics. His book, *Interreligious Resilience: Interreligious Leadership in a Pluralistic World*, co-authored with Michael S. Hogue, offers a pathway for interreligious resilience.

Reflecting on why they selected Dr. Bell, Marcia and Barry Silverberg. program sponsors, noted that he and his work exemplify their vision for the annual *Living the American Jewish Experience lecture.* - to offer a substantive, thought-provoking focus on American Jewish identity and the American Jewish experience, in its historical context as well as the challenges of being Jewish in America and especially Austin today.

This and all Living the American Jewish Experience lectures can be accessed at **http://austinjewishhistory/LTAJE/**

Jews Have Never Lived in a Vacuum: Interreligious Engagement and the American Jewish Experience

Presented by Dean P. Bell, President & CEO
Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership
January 8, 2026

Introduction

There are approximately 7.5-8 million Jews in the United States today—2.5% of the US population and roughly 50% of the world Jewish population (Jews globally comprise 0.2% of the world population).

The experiences of this significant population are quite diverse today, in terms of community affiliation, type of observance, identity, and even geography.

What is more, Jews have had a long and complex history in the US, already dating back to the first Jews in pre state America in the mid-17th century.

On one hand, Jews experienced a significant amount of bias and anti-Jewish and antisemitic sentiment, manifest in many different ways.

On the other hand, one might credibly argue that Jews in America have achieved—despite current challenges and concerns—a kind of golden age, that has occurred in only a few places and times in world history.

This paradox is captured in the experience of Rebecca Samuels, a Jewish woman from Petersburg, Virginia who left a number of personal letters at the end of the 18th century.

She variously referred to the openness and prejudice of the non-Jews around her. On one hand, she wrote to her parents in back in Hamburg, Germany, that "as for the Gentiles, we have nothing to complain about," and on the other hand, in another letter that "Gentiles cannot forsake their anti-Jewish prejudice." (Pamela S. Nadel, *Antisemitism, An American Tradition* (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2025, 23)

Part of that two-fold history has been the work of interreligious encounter engagement, and dialog, which has in part positioned Jews into mainstream American society in remarkably rich if not always smooth ways.

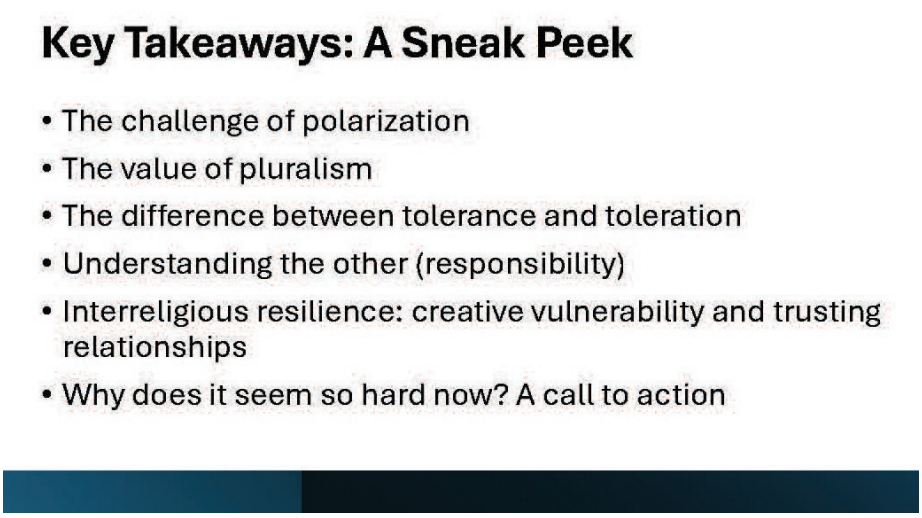
This presentation seeks to raise awareness of some aspects of the American Jewish experience and serve as a call to continue to build bridges across religious and cultural groups in the US and here in Austin especially.

Core to this discussion is the issue of pluralism and American, particularly as it relates to Jewish identity and Jewish relations with non-Jews. I will focus on pluralism and tolerance over simple toleration, stressing creative vulnerability and trust-building as core to successful interfaith relationships, even amidst obstacles in sustaining meaningful interfaith engagement.

In that way, my hope is to create awareness and foster intergroup engagement through shared values rather than political debate.

Some of this work has been done here locally through this important lecture series and the newly founded Greater Austin Jewish Historical Society.

In what follows we will engage with the importance of interreligious engagement, especially in a time of deep polarization and then explore the experiences of Jews in this conversation through some select examples—inflection points if you will—from American Jewish history.



I will conclude by considering how we can apply the lessons from this work and these experiences for good today and into the future.

Interreligious Engagement

Our world feels more polarized and polarizing than ever—in politics, but in so much more beyond that.

As the Columbia University political scientist Peter Coleman writes in his book *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization* that:

> "…most of us are putting much less time and energy into seeking accurate information about the people on the other side of the divide or on the many different challenges facing our world, choosing instead to think and feel in ways that are consistent and conforming with our tribes. We are devoting much more energy to obtaining a sense of belonging and comfort from our groups than to seeking accurate information about our increasingly complicated world" (24)

Especially in a complex world, where we can feel overwhelmed we often seek simplicity (and clarity about what to do rather than nuance) and we tend to read and understand through lenses that amplify what we already believe and reject (regardless of how compelling) the things that do not neatly align with that worldview or perspective.

As Coleman continues, "In sum, highly complex and volatile problems cause us to feel more anxious, think in more simplistic terms, make worse decisions, trust fewer people, prefer hostile leaders, close ranks, and prepare for battle. This is exactly what we are seeing in many of the trends in Pew polling over the past several years." (39)

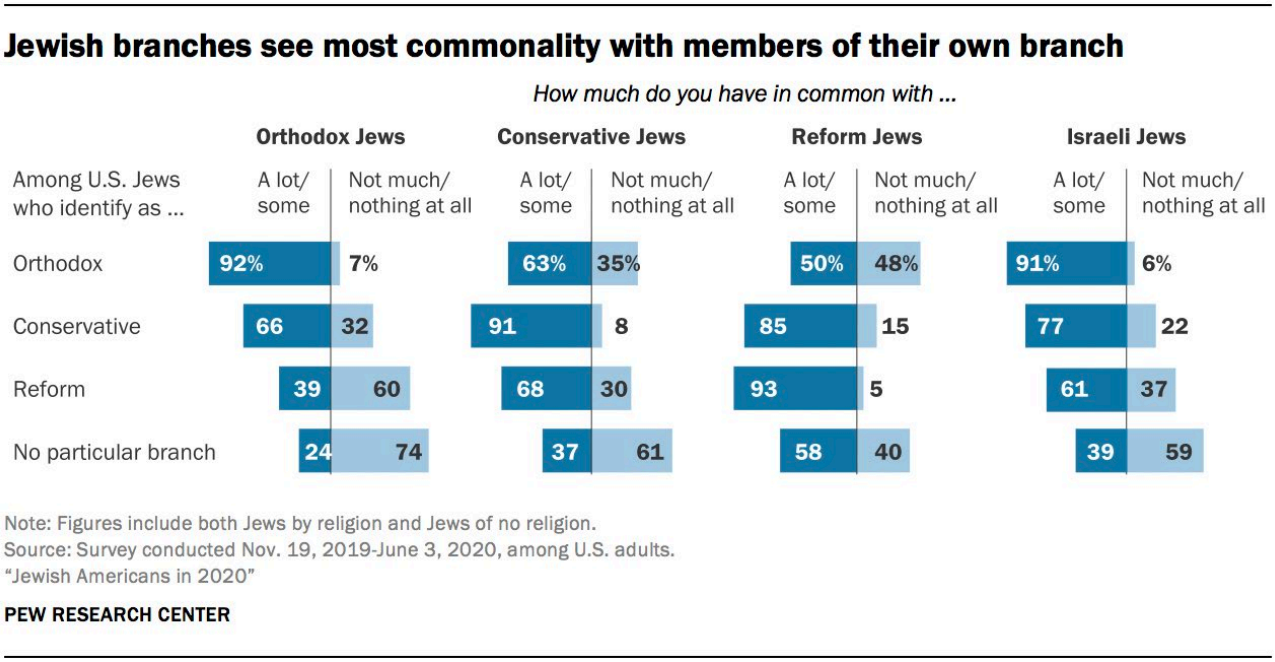
In addressing this polarization, Coleman suggests that there are 5 competencies that help us adapt to complex, long-term problems require:

- **Emotional complexity** (ability to experience and tolerate a broad range of positive and negative emotions simultaneously)
- **Cognitive complexity** (ability to differentiate among multiple perspectives and sources of information)
- **Tolerance for ambiguity** (ability to respond to ambiguous situations without becoming destabilized)
- **Behavioral complexity** (capacity to employ a broad array of necessary but contrasting behaviors)
- **Consideration for future consequences** (ability to balance short-term demands with long-term vision) (Coleman, p. 192)

Of course, polarization and disconnect can happen in many ways and across many areas of our life. Importantly, it can (and does) exist within our Jewish communities as well.

Disconnect Happens Within the Jewish Community as Well as Beyond

A Pew study on “Jewish Americans” from 2020 observes the disconnect between Jews who affiliate with different Jewish denominational groups:



Orthodox Jews, for example, see the greatest commonality with other Orthodox Jews and Israeli Jews (despite the fact that many Israeli Jews are not Orthodox and are in fact secular). They see a good deal (66%) of commonality with Conservative Jews, but far less with Reform or non-denominationally affiliated Jews.

Reform Jews reflect a similar sentiment relative to Orthodox Jews, feeling little commonality with them and far less commonality overall with Israeli Jews, though still significant (61%).

Conservative Jews occupy a middling position, not surprisingly evincing significant commonality, though of various levels, with all the groups studied.

Not surprisingly, as well, non-denominationally affiliated do not find much commonality with any of the denominational branches or Israeli Jews.

That is, internal poles are often set and significant, a trend we find in other religious groups as well.

The Value of Interreligious/ Intergroup Engagement

Religion is sometimes seen as being a source of conflict and polarization.

However, I'd like to suggest that religion, and especially interreligious engagement, when leveraged with a pluralistic approach, holds a key for helping to resolve today's difficult polarization.

While my focus will be on Jewish experiences in the US, pluralistic interreligious engagement is relevant and, I assert essential, for Jews and non-Jews in all contexts.

Well cultivated pluralism allows us to eliminate both condescension and triumphalism. As my research partner and friend Professor Mike Hogue have argued in our book *Interreligious Resilience: Interreligious Leadership for a Pluralistic World*:

> "Pluralism is thus a way of embodying and expressing religious identity and interpreting and navigating religious difference, such that those differences are not experienced as a threat to be avoided or defeated. A pluralist mindset explores religious difference as opportunities for mutual learning that can lead to the creative deepening of diverse religious paths—the learning does not lead one away from one's own religious commitments, but more fully into them." (pp 22-23)

As Harvard religious pluralism scholar Diana Eck notes, pluralism is:

1. energetic engagement of diversity, not just respect for diversity
2. active effort to build understanding across difference, not merely the tolerance of difference
3. the encounter of commitments, not the abandonment of commitments or religious ambivalence…and it is especially…
4. dialog

And, as Mike and I have argued, "Pluralism is also different from tolerance. Tolerance presumes a negative understanding of religious difference, whereas pluralism presumes a positive appreciation of religious difference. Tolerance is a relatively low bar. At its best, tolerance is an attitude of indifference to religious difference, a 'live and let live' attitude; but it is often embodied as a patronizing response to religious difference."

We need more than tolerance. As Goethe once put it, "To tolerate is to insult."

In some important ways, religion is uniquely positioned to assist in this work—particularly if we think about the very nature and function of religion.

Columbia University religion scholar Mark Taylor notes that the term religion derives from two Latin terms: *religare* with an implication of binding and obligation and *relegere* with the implication of being thought through again.

That means that religion can encourage regularity and lead to predictable patterns of thinking and behaving; it can also adapt, helping us to reset boundaries and encourage new thought. (Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007)).

We cannot expect them to sustain a relationship until we express interest and curiosity and knowledge of their value systems as much as we want them to understand ours.

This is certainly true in interreligious engagement!

According to the Pew Research Center survey "What Americans Know about Religion" (2019), Favorable ratings of other religions were correlated with knowledge about a religion. (https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/what-americans-know-about-religion/)

Another Pew study from 2024, "It's a Critical Time to Bridge Religious Divides," the researchers argue that "*Within the field of countering religious bias and promoting pluralism, providers pursue different approaches and target different audiences.*

The approaches generally fall into four categories:

- **Education—**teaching individuals about different religious traditions, practices, and beliefs in a way that promotes understanding.
- **Contact**—exposure to individuals who belong to a religion different from one's own, either face-to-face or indirectly.
- **Skills training**—an intervention in which participants are taught ways to promote positive interactions with members of another faith, such as empathy training or learning to counter misconceptions.
- **Combined approaches**—using more than one approach, such as combining contact with skills training.

Interreligious engagement, particularly through a pluralistic perspective, may be helpful for us today and into the future.

Jews/ Judaism and Relations with (Religious) Others in US History: Inflection Points

Can historical Jewish experiences in the United States provide any further insights?

Let's consider a few key inflection points since Jews first came to what would later become the US in the mid-17th century.

Peter Stuyvesant and the Jews in New Amsterdam

The first Jews arrived in New Amsterdam (now New York) in 1654, fleeing the Portuguese conquest of Brazil.

The settlement of these Jews was opposed by Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch colonial administrator who served as the director-general of New Netherland from 1647 to 1664.

The Jews had close connections with the Jewish community in Amsterdam, who advocated for them, resulting in a letter from the Directors of the Dutch West India Company in June of 1656. In this letter, the Directors conceded that:

> "…Jews or Portuguese people shall not be employed in any of the trades, (from which they are excluded in this city), nor allowed to have open retail shops," however, they also directed that "they may quietly and peacefully carry on their business as before and exercise in all quietness their religion within their houses, for which end they must without doubt endeavor to build their houses close together in a convenient place on one or the other side of New Amsterdam-at their own choice-as they have done here."

While there were significant restrictions on these Jews in America—just as there were throughout Europe—they were permitted to live and carry out their business, albeit quietly and privately in a way that clearly was perceived to have economic value to the Company.

This was an important concession of toleration, even if it did provide Jews with substantial assurances or necessarily long-term security.

The letter did recognize the value the Jews might bring with them, and it recognized their unique religious and communal needs.

The Jewish population remained slow, if growing, through the balance of the 17th and well into the 18th century, reaching a couple thousand by the eve of the Revolution.

In American Jewish history, the relations of the first President, George Washington, are particularly important and widely cited. In August 1790, Washington, along with Thomas Jefferson (Secretary of State) and others visited Newport, Rhode Island, the final state to ratify the Constitution, Washington.

On behalf of the Jews of Newport, the merchant Moses Seixas, greeted the President. Seixas wrote Washington a now famous letter, which Washington repurposed and included in his own letter of thanks to the Hebrew Congregation after he had returned to New York.

Washington, famously, in August 1790, articulated a general vision of liberty of conscience that goes beyond mere toleration:

> "… The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights."

He continued in words now well known: "For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.…"

Washington then turned to address the Jews specifically:

> "May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths and make

us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy."

This important statement on one hand purports to offer safety and protection to the Jews, to do as they would like in the pursuit of their own religion.

Of course, the caveat is that they "continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants."

Thus, although significant in some important ways, especially given its author, the letter continues to offer a kind of conditional toleration—perhaps still in the sense that Goethe demurred.

By 1880 the Jewish population ballooned to 300,000 and then exploded to some 3.5 million by 1920.

The dramatic increase flared tensions as well as opportunities for assimilation.

By the end of the 19th century, there was a good deal of discussion about religion in a more universalizing tone and greater global interactions.

These trends were well reflected in the World's Fair, which took place in Chicago in 1893. As part of the festivities, Chicago Reform rabbi Emil C. Hirsch inveighed that:

> "Religion may then, in very truth, be said to be the universal distinction of man… None is nearer the heart of God than another… None is nearer the heart of God than another…Indeed, the apostles of Christianity after Paul, the Pundits of Buddhism, the Imams of Islam, and last, though not least, the rabbis of modern Judaism, have abandoned the narrow to serve as foundation stones for the temple of all humanity."

Hirsch, like other reformers signaled the universal aspects of Judaism, over against what were sometimes seen as the particularism of Jews, who accounted themselves God's Chosen People.

By universalizing Jews and Judaism, Hirsch placed them into conversation with all religions, making them like everyone, human beings in the image of God who were no different, and presumably should not be treated differently or treat others differently as a result.

These sentiments had already been expressed in 1885 in the Pittsburgh Platform:

> "We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source or book of revelation held sacred in any religious system the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man. We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and

spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages."

Jews continued to engage with more or less success throughout American society.

Antisemitism existed and there remained some limitations on Jews.

At the same time, increasing distancing of religion from government served to make ways for greater Jewish integration.

In a famous Supreme Court decision, Everson v. Board of Education, in 1947 a number of key issues were clarified.

The Court's opinion intended to clarify the first clause of the First Amendment--Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances—concluding that neither state nor federal governments can set up churches not pass laws that "aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another."

In addition, the opinion argued that neither state nor federal government could "force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion," and that "No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance."

Taxes could not be levied to "support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion."

The opinion concluded that "In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect 'a wall of separation between church and State.'"

While Jews were often discriminated against for their religious beliefs, they were at times seen as outsides when it came to nationality (as immigrants) or even in race, often seen as not white.

Karen Brodkin, in *How Jews Became White Folks*…argues that

"On the one hand … Jews were granted many institutional privileges of white racial assignment after World War II. They were also among the economically most upwardly mobile of the European ethnic groups. On the other hand, and despite being relatively successful in material terms, many American Jews tend to think of themselves as distinctly liberal politically, as invested in social justice and in identification with the underdog, and, sometimes, as not white."

The quest for something more than toleration, defined by some dictionaries as: "putting up with" something undesirable, and with neglect or failure to prevent or alleviate it, led to an emphasis on tolerance, defined by some as: "a fair, objective, and permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, beliefs, practices, racial or ethnic origins, etc., differ from one's own".

The American Jewish Committee, a civil rights and Jewish advocacy group founded in 1906 is one of the oldest Jewish advocacy organizations.

Its work has focused on advancing civil liberties for Jews but also fighting forms of discrimination in the US and advancing social equality.

Related to this, AJC produced and aired cartoons in the 1950s as public service announcements related to tolerance and integration.

These shorts assumed that improvements in social equality would benefit all people, including Jews.

Let's look at two of these:

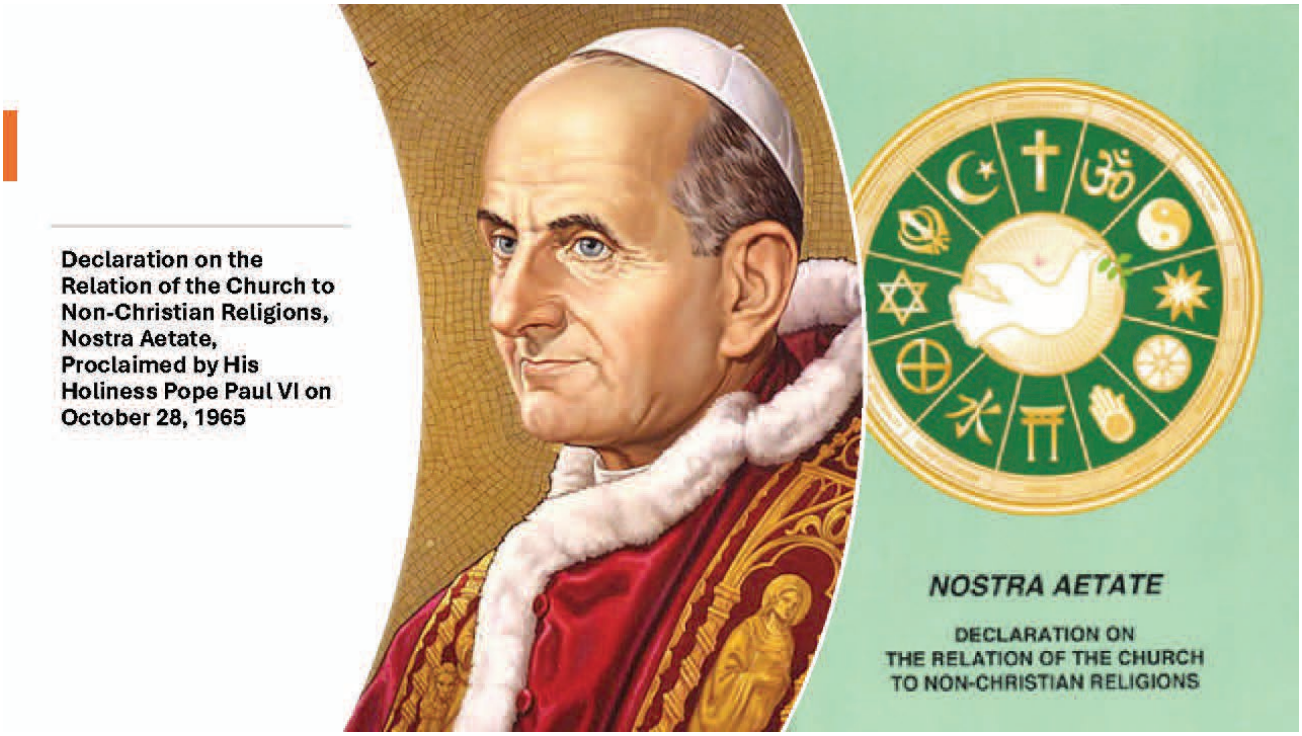
From 1950, the short "Baseball," (Baseball team: https://ajcarchives.org/Portal/Default/en-US/RecordView/Index/1979) emphasized that a nation is like a baseball team, in need of team work to succeed and that it does best when it includes people of all races and creeds.

From the same year, the production "Snicklegrass," (Snicklegrass: https://ajcarchives.org/Portal/Default/en-US/RecordView/Index/1982) emphasized the deleterious impact of hatred of foreigners.

Snickelgrass, who has the fortune to stumble across a magical lamp uses his wish to send all the Americans of foreign descent and whatever they created back to where they came from.

This included people from many countries as well as Protestants, Catholics and Jews.

In the end, since America was a country of immigrants, there was nobody left, except for Snickelgrass himself.



This kind of universalizing began to sweep across the globe and penetrated religious institutions as well after the middle of the 20th century.

In 1965 emerging from the Second Vatican Council Pope Paul VI (completing the work begun by Pope John XXIII) proclaimed a Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate.

This was and remains a remarkable call for dialogue with and respect for non-Christian religions, especially Judaism and Islam.

It argued against antisemitism and encourages an open stance towards Jews.

“As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock,” the declaration announces, before extrapolating further:

> “Thus, the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ-Abraham's sons according to faith are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage.”

At the same time, the declaration broadens this message in section 5:

> “5. We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the

> Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8)….The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. …"

Sowing the seeds for substantive interfaith dialogue, Nostra Aetate has been a highly influential pronouncement.

It has guided much discussion and opened opportunities, especially among Jews and Catholics in the US.

I have had the privilege to participate in some of the truly substantive discussions in this area in Chicago over the past several decades.

And yet, even this strong history feels frayed around the edges, particularly in the wake of the murder of Israelis on October 7, 2023, and the criticism of Israel that has been rampant since, making dialogue particularly with younger constituents even harder.

Challenges and Benefits of Interreligious Engagement

But the challenge to interfaith engagement over recent times can be attributed to a variety of factors.

Several years ago, my colleague Mike Hogue and I surveyed 36 interreligious leaders about the challenges and benefits of this work.

Our respondents were 40 percent Christian (Roman Catholic, Baptist, United Methodist, Pentecostal) and Post-Christian (Universalist Unitarian), 37 percent Jewish (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox), and 23 percent from other religious traditions (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Baha'i, and Zoroastrian).

Our respondents were 57 percent male and 40 percent female (3 percent nonbinary) and ranged in age from their thirties to seventies (7percent thirties; 30 percent forties; 23 percent fifties; 20 percent sixties; and 20 percent seventies).

They articulated a number of **general impediments to interreligious engagement**, including:

- Societal polarization
- Cynicism and challenges of engagement more generally
- Expectations and disappointments
- "Bigger" challenges to address

At the same time, they also shared the many individual communal, and societal benefits of such dialogue:

- Elevating social advocacy and action —change, renewal, reconciliation: getting to know each other and understanding differences and needs
- Advancing pluralism
- Allowing new perspectives
- Engaging others constructively and facilitating conversation to combat polarization
- Enhancing understanding and confronting bias
- Building trust and collegiality; fostering collaboration
- Cultivating agility for learning and adapting through crises and conflict
- Encouraging experimentation and innovation

Given the history we reviewed (and inflection points) as well as the importance and potential reach/impact of religion, how might we think about this area in new and valuable ways?

In order to answer this question, Mike and examined a broad range of research and literature on the theme of resilience, for our sense was that discussions of resilience, long before it became a common and commonly simplistically used, term during covid, could be valuable.

Judith Rodin, who had served as the President of the University of Pennsylvania and hen the President of the Rockefeller Foundation wrote a marvelous book in *The Resilience Dividend*, back in 2014.

In that book she observed that,

> "Resilience is the capacity of any entity—an individual, a community, an organization, or a natural system—to prepare for disruptions, to recover from shocks and stresses, and adapt and grow from a disruptive experience. As you build resilience, therefore, you become more able to prevent or mitigate stresses and shocks you can identify and better able to respond to those you can't predict or avoid. You also develop greater capacity to bounce back from a crisis, learn from it, and achieve revitalization. Ideally, as you become more adept at managing disruption and skilled at resilience building, you are able to create and take advantage of new opportunities in good times and bad." (3-4)

I have always been intrigued by the systems approach that she interjected, noting the levels of resilience, the range of ways that it can be experienced, and the diversity of ways that it can impact us, from what Mike and I termed a simple resilience—bouncing back, if you will—to a more complex resilience of learning, adapting, and growing (even achieving revitalization) through disruption.

In our work on interreligious leadership, we in fact identified three important components within religion that support resilience.

These are essential in interreligious engagement.

First, **spirituality** can help to create a sense of coherence and produce meaning from and the ability to manage crises and difficult situations.

Second, **community** plays an important role in building and exercising resilience. Communal networks and relationships provide resources and access to them, as well as the redundancy necessary for resilient responses to crisis.

They also provide social support structures.

Finally, **memory** plays a valuable role in resilience building.

It utilizes schemas that help to interpret new information, and it creates explanations that connect new and prior experiences and allows for the assimilation of new experiences or the transformation of previous models.

As a result of these and other reflections and the application of a range of ecological, environmental, natural disaster mitigation, and behavioral sciences research, we determined that complex resilience is made possible by the confluence of four things:

We term this VITA, or life in Latin," and it is literally a life stance.

This framework has been utilized in a range of leadership contexts, but it has particular relevance in interreligious engagement.

In this framework, we often think about asking some specific sets of questions in each of the four areas.

Under **Vulnerability**: What are my assumptions? How are others understanding it and why?

Regarding **Intentionality**: How can I consistently address it? How do I build an intentional stance?

In the case of **Trust**: Who do I need to engage and how? How do I build a trusted network of collaborators?

And with **Awareness:** What do I need to know? What do I need to monitor?

Let's apply this to one specific case, which is not a "real" case but a composite of real event sand real issues that have emerged over the past several years.

Here is the case:

> A Christian and Jewish congregation in the same part of town have had a number of joint programs over the years. There have been generally friendly but informal relations between the leadership of the two congregations. On occasion there have been some tensions between the congregations along socio-economic, racial, and religious lines. In general, the members of neither congregation have made much effort to learn about the faith, traditions, and situation of the other. A recent wave of violence in the area led to the murder of a Jewish congregant. The leadership and members of the Jewish congregation were surprised and disappointed that the Church leadership and membership remained silent in public and few reached out to extend condolences or offer support. In return, some Church members shared that they did not feel that the Jewish congregants were supportive over many years when there were threats against the Church or attacks against its members.

Can a VITA approach to interreligious resilience be helpful in this case?

We often make assumptions about what other people think, feel or have experienced.

In a state of vulnerability, we are opening to understanding that and how that may shape the perspectives and concerns of others.

How might doing that in this case open up a sense of connection and care?

At the same time, we often take for granted our own ideas and priorities—are there ways to ask honest questions about why we do what we do or don't do, the reasons for that and the potential impact on others?

Relationships, especially across difference, require clarity and consistency.

They also require that we are intentional and often proactive.

How might we think about supporting others and how do we communicate our needs and expectations as well?

Are there ways of being intentional that do not feel proscriptive and simply a checklist?

What might that look like in terms of planning, budgeting, and even scheduling?

Being vulnerable and intentional help to build trust.

But trust is more. It is about the construction of a web of relationships and connections, which provides feedback loops and redundancies (to use systems language) and that provide a network of collaborators and colleagues that can be activated and leveraged, especially in times of need or crises.

What are some ways that our congregants and congregations could build trust over time?

In part, perhaps though showing up at various times; in part by finding ways to be supporting and being clear about what that might look like and what expectations we and they may have.

And finally, to be complexly resilient, we need to continually evaluate how it is going, what is changing in us and out there in the world, and what we might want to consider doing differently.

Are there inflection points in the relations between the congregations that could provide valuable feedback about how things are progressing and where there are both

Conclusions

In part, the elements of VITA are quite obvious.

However, performing these tasks and asking these questions can be difficult when we live in a polarized and polarizing world, where all of the elements feel much more complicated than they need to be.

In our research and in our conversations, Mike and I learned that resilience can be learned and cultivated, that it can play out in daily and mundane things as well as in larger and more complicated things, and that it exists at many different levels.

From that standpoint, and like the pluralism and tolerance that address similar issues, it seems essential today and for the foreseeable future.

I hope that this quick trip through the challenges and benefits of interreligious engagement (resilience, and leadership) combined with the example of American Jewish history during key inflection points in the journey from toleration to tolerance is useful as we look back, but especially as we navigate the challenges of today and prepare ourselves for the disorder and challenges, as well as the opportunities, of the future.

Dean P. Bell's Publications:

- *Judaism, History, and the Environment: Climate Change and Natural Disasters* (Bloomsbury)
- *The Routledge Handbook of Judaism in the 21st Century, 1st Edition*, edited with Dr. Keren E. Fraiman (Routledge)
- *Interreligious Resilience: Interreligious Leadership in a Pluralistic World*, co-authored with Dr. Michael S. Hogue (Bloomsbury)
- *Plague in the Early Modern World: A Documentary History* (Routledge)
- *The Routledge Handbook of Jewish History and Historiography* (Routledge)
- *The Bloomsbury Companion to Jewish Studies* (Bloomsbury)
- *Jews in the Early Modern World* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers)
- *Jewish Identity in Early Modern Germany: Memory, Power and Community* (Routledge)
- *Jews, Judaism and the Reformation in Sixteenth Century Germany*, edited with Stephen G. Burnett (Brill)
- *Sacred Communities: Jewish and Christian Identities in Fifteenth Century Germany* (Brill)

Resources Related to Lecture Topic:

- Coleman, Peter T. *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.
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- Hogue, Michael S. and Dean Phillip Bell, *Interreligious Resilience: Interreligious Leadership for a Pluralistic World*. London: Bloomsbury, 2022.

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Websites Related to Lecture Topic

- Harvard Pluralism Project: https://pluralism.org/about
- Pew Research Center: https://www.pewresearch.org/
- Interfaith America: https://www.interfaithamerica.org/
- Parliament of the World's Religions: https://parliamentofreligions.org/
- The Elijah Interfaith Institute: https://elijah-interfaith.org/