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INCLUSIVE AMERICA PROJECT

CONSCIENCE, COMMUNITY AND CITIZENSHIP:

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN AN AGE OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM
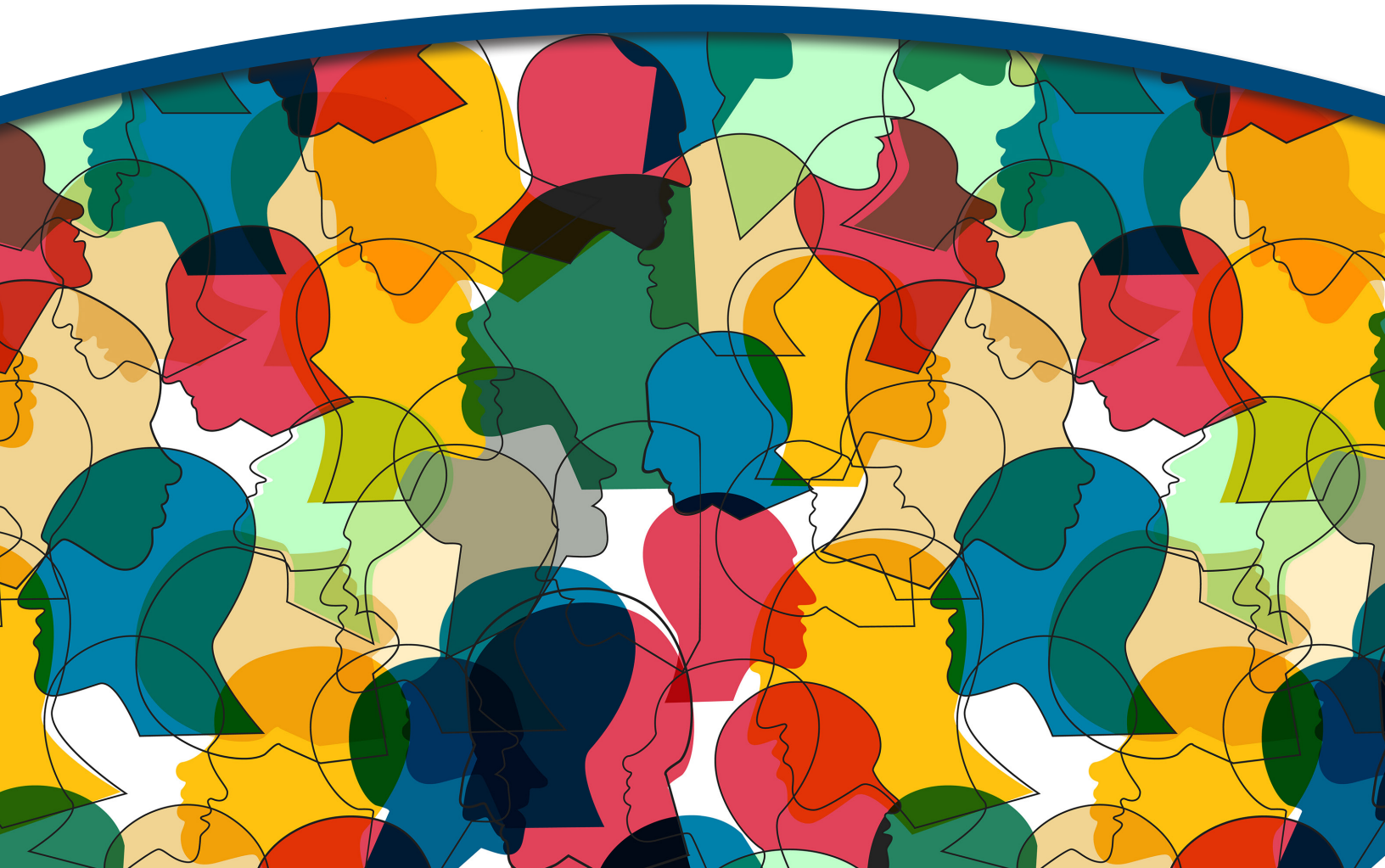
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P R O G R A M

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Findings for a Pluralist World

On October 9, 2018, the Aspen Institute Inclusive America Project, with generous support from the Democracy Fund and the Templeton Religion Trust, hosted a symposium entitled *Conscience, Community and Citizenship* to examine the role of religious pluralism in building a stronger democracy. The symposium sought to answer the following questions: What characteristics of engagement should we express through our words and actions? What skill sets are required for cross-cultural and religious literacy so we can engage, respect, and protect the "other"? How do we combine these characteristics and skills to protect and promote both conscience and community in the name of citizenship? What are the points of intersection between the ideals of religious freedom and religious pluralism?

The discussion was led by experts in a wide range of fields that touch on these issues in both American and foreign contexts. It was buoyed by contributions from an interactive audience. The conversation also ranged over a number of concerns not originally anticipated, adding significant depth and insight. The chief among them were: How does a society build a shared narrative that is inclusive of all while honoring the complexities and traumas of the past? How do we successfully frame our individual and institutional outreach efforts to build relationships when the narratives and terminology of this work are not yet shared and/or are already loaded with meaning?

The following is a summary of the event, which provides preliminary responses to the questions posed above, as well as suggestions for next steps.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These are the topline takeaways from the symposium. There is greater detail in the full summary report that follows.

Three main themes:

1. This moment in American history is fraught with challenges including a rise in vitriolic rhetoric that stokes hate, fear, and violence against minorities. Yet, there is an opportunity and sense of urgency to cross lines of difference and build coalitions.

    - Ongoing demographic shifts in America have created tensions around actual and perceived changes in the distribution of institutional and elected power. Existing diversity does not equal pluralism, which will take proactive effort to build.

    - Current cultural movements have created a deeper recognition of the need to address our nation's history with honesty and candor, particularly the violence against African American and indigenous communities. In turn, the public sharing of individual and collective trauma, such as the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, have encouraged the development of new kinds of engagement.

    - Nationalist movements consolidate state control and power at the expense of diversity by tying citizenship to narrowly defined ethno-religious identities.

    - There is an urgent need to create shared narratives sourced in and spurred by local contexts.

2. Human relationships and knowledge are the foundation of all community strength; it is critical to create truly shared narratives.

    - Religious literacy must begin with one's own tradition including what it says about respecting the other. There are defined, learnable skillsets that can be applied to the work of relationship building, creating shared narratives, and allyship to build religious pluralism.

    - Relationships across divisions must be built as a matter of course, on a regular human level, rather than solely in response to crisis. Because the psychiatric burden on minority faith members is high already, the members of ethno-religious majorities must reach out to minority neighbors. Political as well as religious lines must be crossed.

    - Narratives tell the story of who we are. For a society to be able to move forward together, it must have truly shared narratives that incorporate everyone without losing past lessons or shared hope for the future.

3. Stable institutions are necessary to provide ongoing connections between local and national efforts to support religious pluralism.

    - Rapid response interventions will not ultimately create the conditions necessary for pluralism to flourish.

    - Institutional connections between local efforts and national policies and institutions are key to sustaining pluralism in a diverse world. There are currently very few institutions that function as the connective tissue between those doing work on the ground and national policy makers.

- Significant investment is required to grow and sustain such efforts because cross-cultural and cross-religious work is generational. One-off funding efforts will not be enough. Funding must be directed specifically to local efforts and to those civil society institutions that encourage national policies that support pluralism and those assisting and connecting local and national efforts.

PRELIMINARIES

In the introductory session, Chris Stewart, Vice President of Grant Programs at the Templeton Religion Trust, and Meryl Justin Chertoff, Executive Director of the Justice and Society Program and founder of the Inclusive America Project, discussed pluralism, religious nationalism, and the opposing poles of healthy and dangerous engagement with religion. Their conversation focused on religious pluralism as an ideal enshrined by the American founders in the First Amendment to the Constitution and in writings that reflect the values underlying the first freedom. Embodied in this concept: all religious orientations are equal, none competes with civic commitments, and government and religious communities thrive separately from each other. The guarantee of freedom of exercise of religion and the concept of liberty of conscience are not the end goals, but, as Stewart says, the necessary conditions for pluralism. Stewart and Chertoff defined pluralism not as the lowest common denominator but a meeting of commitments and difference.

Religious nationalism, Stewart and Chertoff argued, is an attempt to create or enforce an ethno-religious majority. It is a danger to both minority and majority religious communities because, although a majority-religion bargain with a government may seem to be immediately advantageous to that faith community, the government then has the power to overthrow that religious authority and itself become the religion. That, Chertoff says, is the road to tyranny. Religious nationalism therefore challenges and endangers people of both minority and majority religions.

THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT

Panelists: Rev. Iva Carruthers, Mark Charles, Tyler Deaton, Rev. Kristen Farrington, Rabbi Michael Holzman, Robert Jones, Abigail Pogrebin, Maggie Siddiqi, Simran Jeet Singh, Saleema Snow, and Jim Wellman.

The first set of conversations ranged widely over contemporary issues of religious difference and religious and community leadership. The discussion then dug deep into the religious and civic skills necessary to be cross-culturally literate and capable of protecting and engaging one another with respect. The conversation was shaped by excellent audience questions. Several themes were repeated:

We Are in a Moment of Unique Challenges

This moment in American history is fraught with challenges, including a rise in vitriolic rhetoric that stokes hate and fear and its success in promoting violence against minorities. Yet, there is an opportunity and sense of urgency to cross lines of difference and build coalitions. The current moment presents a challenge to us to get involved or stand on the sidelines, complicit in the violent outcomes.

1. **Ongoing demographic shifts in the US create tensions around actual, perceived, or unattained shifts in institutional and elected power.** The current major shift in American demographics is a new challenge to the American republic, in which the White Protestant hegemony of previous centuries is rapidly declining.[1] Although that shift away from Protestant identity is primarily a result of decreasing engagement with religious institutions, rather than from a major influx of non-Christians, the associated shift in power dynamics has caused many White Protestants to react with fear about the loss of hegemony and institutional power. This reaction is especially intense because the winners of that power are often perceived as foreign, including non-whites and/or immigrants of minority faiths. Shifts in institutional power are slower, partly because the former majority has worked to maintain control over positions of power via mechanisms such as institutional racism. Institutional change in government is slow because voting patterns mean that younger, more religiously, racially, and ethnically diverse voters are less likely to go to the polls than older, white, Protestant Americans. The result is a heightened tension around cultural and institutional shifts.

2. **The public sharing of individual and collective trauma has encouraged the development of new kinds of engagement.** Communities and individuals who have suffered trauma may struggle to engage across lines of difference, especially when those boundaries have been the locus of their wounding. For example, a victim of anti-Semitism may be reluctant to engage in interfaith collaboration. However, sharing stories of wounding can open paths toward deeper conversations. A greater awareness of how issue-framing can influence discussions, and a willingness to interrogate one's assumptions can radically reset conversations in helpful ways. Thoughtful reframing can

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[1] See for example research by PRRI, Maxine Najle and Robert P. Jones, "American Democracy in Crisis: The Fate of Pluralism in a Divided Nation" (PRRI, February 19, 2019), https://www.prri.org/research/american-democracy-in- crisis-the-fate-of-pluralism-in-a-divided-nation/, or the General Social Survey, Samuel Smith, "Religious 'nones' Now as Big as Evangelicals in the US, New Data Shows," The Christian Post, March 20, 2019, https://www.christianpost.com/news/religious-nones-now-as-big-as-evangelicals-in-the-us-new-data-shows.html.

identify alternative solutions to seemingly intractable problems, and sometimes that is by using familiar language that approaches problems in new ways. Other ways of working across difference, such as through technological innovations, or types of movement building, such as Black Lives Matter, are bellwethers of new modes of engagement.

3. **There is an urgent need to create shared narratives.** Americans are rapidly losing shared narratives that can form the foundation for community boundaries, history, values, and vision for the future. Those communal narratives are fading in part because citizens are beginning to recognize more broadly that not everyone was included in those narratives to begin with. The "American Story" is one such complex shared narrative. While newcomers may not have participated in particular historical eras, we all are assured to be part of a collective memory. However, as the experience of enslaved and disenfranchised Black Americans illustrates for one, this is an incomplete and at times deceptive frame. Recognizing and wrestling with the other narratives that make up our complex history, many of which recount deep traumas, challenges previously held narratives of a golden and blameless past. One aspect of progress has been the opening aperture for inclusion: whether in a mainstream or parallel narrative. To move forward together, Americans must create new narratives together that recognize collective trauma and blame while articulating expansive and inclusive boundaries and values, as well as a shared future.

Human Relationships and Knowledge are the Foundation of all Community Strength

Much of the discussion revolved around the deep and deeply human needs to know oneself and to build strong relationships. The more divided we feel, the more we are susceptible to being pulled apart from one another in structural ways, such as by divergent sets of de facto voting rights and immigration policies. But, human relationships are the foundation of all community, and those relationships are best and strongest when we are ourselves well grounded in our own values and traditions.

1. **Religious literacy must begin with one's own tradition.** The conversation returned repeatedly to the value in having deep connection to and literacy in one's own tradition. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim values, such as humility and protecting the stranger, are the foundation of the compassion that is required for living with difference. Gaps in understanding about our own faith can make it harder to walk firmly in our faith tradition when it asks us to offer humanity and empathy to someone different from ourselves.

2. **Relationships across divisions must be built as a matter of course, on a regular human level, rather than solely in response to crisis. Members of the ethno-religious majorities must reach out to minority neighbors. Political as well as religious lines must be crossed.** When human relationships come first, deeper connections, understanding of shared concerns, and mutual support in times of crisis will follow more naturally. Opportunities may be as simple as sharing space on a regular basis. Majority/minority personal relationships are necessary connective tissue in broader society, and it is up to majority members to reach out to others. Minority members must be willing to engage with majority members who may not understand that good intentions alone are not enough. Relationship-building across religious lines is not enough in these very divided times. Relationships that cross the lines of political party must also be cultivated on the same human and regular level.

3. **Necessary skillsets can be learned.** There are defined, learnable skillsets that can be applied to the work of relationship building, creating shared narratives, and allyship.

    Religious literacy in one's own tradition is a starting point to cross-cultural religious literacy, evaluation of self and context, understanding verbal and nonverbal communication, and negotiation. Other skills are organizational and movement-building in nature, skills necessary to develop and sustain institutional homes for this difficult, generational work.

Funding the Vessels of this Work is Critical to Success

The conversation returned again and again to the idea that safe spaces must be created and maintained for the necessary work of relationship-building. Those spaces are often created by institutions, and those institutions must themselves be supported. Although programs may be championed individually, programmatic success depends on institutional stability. That stability is best maintained by funding the institutional vessel.

1. **Time and space for connecting deeply across inter- and intrafaith divisions must be deliberately set aside. This separate space is necessary to cultivate difficult but rewarding conversations.** The spaces necessary for such connections vary according to the situation. Some conversations need to be intra-faith in order to solve issues deeply troubling to one's own community, and some need to draw in a wide variety of voices. There must always be parity and a baseline willingness to listen openly and be deeply truthful. Fear of difference can be destroyed by familiarity, and sometimes it is the mundane touchpoints that are predicate to deeper connections. Conversations about kids, commutes, and aging parents can pave the way for discussions about fraught issues.

   Although deep virtues of compassion are learned in friendships with people similar to oneself, the greatest opportunities for learning and growth are in deep friendships across lines of difference. However, conversations across difference should be expected to be both personally and institutionally difficult. Leaders who dare to move across lines might see congregational membership drop or themselves be too uncomfortable with the challenges of those conversations.

2. **It is necessary to build strong institutions in the fields of religious pluralism and inter- and intrafaith collaboration.** The difficulty and complexity of the inter- and intrafaith conversations described above requires strong institutional support. Although interfaith and religious pluralism movements exist, they are not yet robust nor at the scale they need to be to effect the greatest change. Movements should exist not just in the biggest cities, but in small towns in the Midwest, Northwest, and South. Building nascent institutions and supporting newer institutions will require significant capital and personal investment. Colleges and the public K-12 school system can support racial, religious, and ethnic diversity and require religious literacy education. Faith communities can partner to create the space for difficult conversations and may be effective at training leadership to create space in their own congregations for the same.

3. **Successful responses to conflict might be models for other issues, but must be applied only with careful attention to local situations.** There are models that have successfully pushed back against increased division and rancor, or for the healing of trauma. Every situation is unique, however, so models that work in once context are not readily transferable to the next situation. Instead, the learnings from each success must be drawn out and applied anew, with flexibility and attention to context. The skillsets mentioned above are invaluable to fostering a capacity to listen carefully and rethink models to fit new situations. Where concerted, well-funded organized efforts are being made to create division, such as around Islamophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment, concerted effort must be made and funded in response. Outreach to the same spokespersons of those sentiments, such as certain legislators, is essential, if unpalatable. Additionally, organizations that support individual and community victims of bias crimes with legal help, conflict-resolution skills development, or media training need long-term funding. These organizations are often themselves faith-based and community-centered — categories that frequently disqualify them from major philanthropic funding.

INTERNATIONAL VANTAGE POINTS

Panelists: Susan Hayward, Reşat Kasaba, Nicole Bibbins Sedaca, and Anand Yang.

Panelists discussed three nations in very challenging religious and democratic conflicts: India, Turkey, and Myanmar. They focused on the ideas of nationalism, pluralism, and citizenship, and the main forces at work in each. The main recurring idea was that in each case leadership needed to recognize the diversity of the society, engage civil society, and create an identity that both respects minorities and that everyone can buy into.

1. **Existing diversity does not equal pluralism.** In each of the three nations discussed, past or present extensive diversity of ethnic and religious identities did not automatically create either pluralism or strife. However, those seeking power in each nation have leveraged existing diversity and latent prejudices to foment division and cement their hold on power or appeal to potential foreign allies.

2. **Every situation has a unique history and context.** Each nation's history referred back to its interaction with European colonialism (i.e., Myanmar and India) or European failure to live up to inclusive ideals (e.g., Turkey's exclusion from the EU) in its national narratives. Development of democracy also creates a necessity to wrestle again with the codification of how state and religion (and religious diversity) interact. For example, in India, the constitution does not provide a guarantee of religious freedom. Myanmar's messy democratic process has exacerbated religious and anti-foreign prejudices.

3. **A common narrative is essential for community cohesion.** As in the domestic context, the lack of common narratives means there is no unifying identity that crosses all types of diversity – there is no effective common body. Instead, narratives exclude some and prioritize others. In Turkey, for example, school curricula ignore Alevi and Kurdish people.

4. **State control and power are often consolidated at the expense of diverse identities.** In each country, the state has attempted to consolidate power by defining the boundaries of legitimate citizenship around a narrow ethno-religious identity. In Turkey, that identity is a brand of Sunni Islam that does not challenge the political status quo. In Myanmar, it is Buddhist and of the ethnic majority. In India, it is Hindu identity. As the definition of citizenship has narrowed on religious and ethnic terms, those alternate religious and ethnic identities become increasingly viewed by the state and by nationalist forces as a threat to the cohesion of the nation.

5. **There are some promising paths forward.** Opportunities for civil society to make positive contributions abound. Local groups and actors who step up and investigate false rumors or agitate to protect other groups can maintain local resilience against the same forces that might otherwise lead to violence.

6. **The impetus and sources for creating shared, inclusive narratives must be local.** Any hint that the impetus or the ideas are foreign will trigger further pushback and polarization. The framework must be rooted in the local history and existing narratives and values. Critically, the state and institutions must reflect and truly support the shared narrative and real pluralism. States that espouse a shared narrative but enact policies that work against it do not provide a safe container for pluralism to thrive. Local and national efforts to support pluralism must be connected. One without the other is incomplete. So, there must be infrastructure to support and mediate that connection.

CONCLUSION

Chris Seiple, Senior Fellow at the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies University of Washington, and Zeenat Rahman, Director of the Inclusive America Project, concluded by analyzing the day's main themes and suggesting a way forward. The IAP's new initiative, the Religious Pluralism Funders' Circle holds great promise as an institutional vessel for much of the work around understanding and promoting religious pluralism.

1. **Stable institutions are necessary to provide ongoing connections between local and national efforts to support religious pluralism.** Rapid response interventions will not ultimately create the conditions necessary for pluralism to flourish. Institutional connections between local efforts and national policies and institutions are key to sustaining pluralism in a diverse world. There are currently very few institutions that function as the connective tissue between those doing work on the ground and national policy conversations. Significant investment is required to grow and sustain such efforts because cross-cultural and cross-religious work is generational. One-off funding efforts will not be enough. Funding must be directed specifically to local efforts, but also to those civil society institutions that encourage national policies that support pluralism and that support and connect local and national efforts.

2. **Literacy and other skillsets are necessary for this work, but they can be learned.** Religious literacy and other skills are required for this work, but these are learnable skills, such as evaluation of self and context, verbal and nonverbal communication, and negotiation. Cross-cultural and cross-religious literacy is not so much about knowing all the details of others' faiths and cultures, but about being more able to ask the right questions and thereby more deeply engaging the other. Scriptural literacy in one's own tradition is the basis for engaging with the core values of that tradition, including instructions about treating the other with dignity and respect. The resources needed to learn these skills and literacy need to be more broadly available. Resources do exist but should be much more available, particularly in spaces for young people, including in college settings. There are some resources and curriculum developers for education settings and elsewhere, some of which are publicized in our own *Pluralism in Peril* report.

3. **Creating truly shared narratives is necessary but difficult work.** Narratives are incredibly powerful. They can be inclusive, exclusive, or complex. Narratives can bring up parts of our past that are unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or hurtful, and they may challenge our ideas of ourselves. Finding a way to craft a shared one that does not dismiss the parts that are painful will be difficult, but it must be shared work.

4. **Majority/minority relations are always at the roots of this kind of strife.** The human condition is that the majority tends to treat the minority poorly. However, there are values in every culture that push against that tendency. It is those local values, what Seiple notes are central to the Prophetic Voice in the Christian tradition, which must be at the root of solutions. Although lack of majority understanding of minority experience of oppression is widespread, it can be remedied by creating touchpoints across those lines. To address that lack, two things must happen. First, minority leaders

must step up and be willing to begin a conversation that does not begin with their own oppression and trauma at the hands of the majority. These leaders should expect to take fire for crossing divides from their own stakeholders. Second, majority members must reach out to minorities. Minority populations, because of disparity of size, cannot bear the burden of reaching out to every member of the majority population. Roundtables or other types of safe spaces where majority and minority communities all have a seat and none are marginalized are necessary parts of the equation.

5. **In-group conversations are the hardest to have.** Disagreements within groups are often the most difficult to overcome. Conversations that address these intra-group disagreements are part of the work required to bring people of very different backgrounds to engage in multi-faith work. Failure to do so marginalizes or excludes viewpoints from the table and makes any agreements incomplete.

6. **Local focus is key.** Individuals do not live in a single issue, and disputes that touch on faith always touch on other issues as well. Every situation is different, so that the process, issues, and outcome have to have local impetus, local participants, local focus, and locally-oriented solutions.

GLOSSARY

Intrafaith – Related to engagement between members of a single faith;
e.g., Reform-Conservative Jewish dialogue

Interfaith – Related to engagement between different faiths or members of different faiths;
e.g., Christian-Muslim dialogue

Religious Literacy – Knowledge of the basic tenets of the world's major religious traditions

Religious Nationalism – An attempt to create or enforce an ethno-religious majority

Religious Pluralism – Active engagement with religious diversity rather than mere tolerance
of religious difference

PANELISTS

Rev. Dr. Iva E. Carruthers
General Secretary
Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference

Mark Charles
Author
Reflections from the Hogan

Meryl Justin Chertoff
Executive Director
Justice and Society Program
The Aspen Institute

Tyler Deaton
President
Allegiance Strategies

Susan Hayward
Senior Advisor
Religion & Inclusive Societies
United States Institute of Peace

Rabbi Michael Holzman
Rabbi
Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation

Dr. Robert Jones
CEO
Public Religion Research Institute

Dr. Reşat Kasaba
Director and Golub Chair of International Studies
Jackson School of International Studies
University of Washington

Rev. Kristen Farrington
Executive Director
Religious Freedom Institute

Abigail Pogrebin
Author and Immediate Past-President
Central Synagogue of Manhattan

Zeenat Rahman
Director
Inclusive America Project
The Aspen Institute

Professor Nicole Bibbins Sedaca
Chair of the Global Politics and
  Security Concentration
School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University

Dr. Chris Seiple
Advisor
Templeton Religion Trust
Senior Fellow
Jackson School of International Studies
University of Washington

Maggie Siddiqi
Director of Communications and
  Strategic Initiatives
El-Hibri Foundation

Dr. Simran Jeet Singh
Senior Religion Fellow
The Sikh Coalition

Professor Saleema Snow
Associate Professor of Law
University of the District of Columbia
President
KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for
Human Rights

Dr. Chris Stewart
Vice President
Grant Programs
Templeton Religion Trust

Dr. Jim Wellman
Professor and Chair of the Comparative
  Religion Program
Jackson School of International Studies
University of Washington

Dr. Anand Yang
Professor and Chair of History Department
Jackson School of International Studies
University of Washington

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