Thank you to the Chair of Moral Values, Dr. Blank-Libra, and the Diversity Committee for inviting me to come and speak to you about my work today. I am a Research Affiliate for the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. Until four years ago I was a pastor in Sioux Falls; then I moved to Boston to work on a Doctor of Ministry degree. I wanted to study the increasing religious diversity of the U.S., and find ways to help my congregation respond to that diversity. When I was a kid growing up in NW Iowa, we thought religious diversity meant a Catholic family had moved into town. Now my next-door neighbor is Muslim. Back when I started ministry we were trying to figure out how to relate to other Christian denominations; you know, how do Lutherans relate to Baptists? Now we are trying to figure out how to relate to other religions, because our neighbors are not only Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist, they are Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Baha’i, and many other religions.

Most of these religions have been in the U.S. for a very long time, but because they were clustered in cities on the east and west coasts, they were less visible to us. What has changed is that Americans practicing minority religions are spread across the entire country now, including South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota—so these religions are more visible than ever before, and their numbers have grown significantly because immigration laws changed in 1965. In Maple Grove Minnesota, e.g., there is a beautiful, ornate Hindu temple that is a perfect replica of a famous Hindu temple in Kanchi, South India. In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, there is a sprawling white, Muslim mosque with a turquoise minaret on top, surrounded by cornfields. It is the Mother Mosque of North America. In Dearborn, MI at Fordson High School there are so many Muslim students, that they have no choice but to cancel school on Muslim holidays, since too many kids were absent for those days to count as legal school days anymore. There’s a great movie trailer on YouTube about Fordson’s football team: it shows them having football practice in the dark, before dawn, because during their holy month of Ramadan the Muslim football players fast between dawn and dusk, and this would allow them to eat closer to the time of football practice. I tell you these things to show just how religiously diverse we are, all over the country.

The United States is now the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Isn’t that amazing! The U.S. is now the most religiously diverse nation in the world…and yet we know almost nothing about each other’s religions.

Why does this matter? Why do you need to understand your neighbors who are religiously “other,” by which I mean simply that they practice a religion other than the one you practice? For me, there are two reasons we need to understand people who are religiously “other”: one is civic and other is a matter of my faith. Let’s first look at the civic reason for each of us to get to know people who are religiously “other.” The word “civic” refers to our community life together: how do we, as citizens, organize and relate to each other in our local communities? I want to share three case studies with you that involve civic issues—these are true stories about dilemmas that have come up in communities because of our increased religious diversity. First let me tell you a little bit about why the Pluralism Project uses case studies.

One of the goals of The Pluralism Project is to provide resources that help people learn about other religions, and relate to the people who practice them. We all love a good story, so stories are good entry points for learning. We turn a story into a case study by focusing on the problem in the story. There’s a dilemma that needs to be solved in a case study. A case study is meant
to be difficult to solve; there is not usually a clearly obvious “right” answer. And the case study will ask case study participants to step into someone else’s shoes in the story and figure out a solution. Only after the case study participants have tried to solve the problem, do they get to find out how the real-life story actually turned out. The first case I want to tell you about is called *The Mosque in Palos Heights*.

1. In Palos Heights, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, a group of local Muslims bought a church with the intention of converting it into a mosque. Some citizens did not want a mosque in their town. They went to the zoning board and said, this building is zoned to be a church, and a mosque is not a church. The zoning board dragged its feet for weeks, discussing, e.g. if Islam was a “real religion,” how traffic might be impacted if worship was on Friday instead of Sunday. Meanwhile, the citizen group also pressured the city council, demanding that they block the sale of the church. The council voted to offer the Muslims $200,000 if they would walk away from the deal and build their mosque in some other town. However, the mayor disagreed with his council. He argued that they had an obligation to uphold the First Amendment, which says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…”

The mayor argued that the Muslims’ right to worship freely included the right to have a place to do it. So the mayor had to decide whether or not to veto the Council’s $200,000 offer to the Muslims. He faced tremendous opposition—hundreds of people packed town council meetings, the national media got involved, the mayor received hate mail at his home. The town was split apart as neighbors argued about the issue. This case puts you in the mayor’s shoes and asks: What would you do if you were the mayor?

Well, the mayor sent a letter to every pastor in town asking them to preach sermons on loving your neighbor, and then he vetoed the $200,000 offer, calling it “an insult to Muslims and fiscally irresponsible of the city!” But then...the Muslims sued the city! It is a 20 page case, so let me cut to the ending. The Muslims decided to move to a neighboring suburb, and eventually their lawsuit was dismissed.

This case touches on several important topics: the difficulty some minority religions experience even though freedom of religion is an ideal in this country; the lack of basic knowledge about this minority religion; the complexity of the issues for local government officials; and the importance of leadership in our civic life.

2. Let me tell you about a second case that involves civic life and First Amendment rights. In a case entitled *Trouble in Troy*, a Hindu woman named Paddma Kuppa asked if she could offer a prayer at a National Day of Prayer event held on the steps of city hall in Troy, MI. The local coordinator of the NDP event—Lori Wagner, who is an Evangelical Christian—refused, saying that only prayers reflecting the Judeo-Christian tradition are allowed.

The courts have traditionally interpreted the First Amendment—which says government may not establish a religion—to mean that the government cannot preference one religion over another, which might imply or contribute to the establishment of that religion. So when Lori Wagner refused to let a Hindu participate, this presented a dilemma for the city council. For the past 10 years, Wagner’s group had planned the National Day of Prayer. It had always been held on city hall steps, using city hall chairs, microphones, and even their copier. The mayor and council had participated, with a huge banner hung over their heads proclaiming the theme. This year, Lori Wagner’s plan was no different. But now, the city attorney warned the mayor: doing it on city hall steps in the usual manner could create the appearance that city government was
“endorsing” Christianity, especially because everyone knew by now that the Hindu prayer was being excluded.

Hundreds of townspeople packed council meetings. The local Jewish rabbi, who had taken part in National Day of Prayer events in the past, pulled out, saying he did not wish to be part of an event that excluded other religions. Other religious leaders formed an interfaith group and asked to be given authority to plan an interfaith event instead of the exclusively Christian one.

The mayor announced he would not participate this year, and the town council turned down Lori Wagner’s request to use the city hall steps, offering her three alternative sites on city-owned property instead. This might have been the end of the debate, except lawyers from The Thomas More Law Center, whose mission is to preserve America’s Judeo-Christian heritage, entered the debate on behalf of Lori Wagner and the Christians now supporting her. They threatened to sue the city, saying the Christians had a right to meet on city hall steps, and any denial of permission threatened their right to free speech and free assembly.

Paddma Kuppa, the Hindu woman, framed the issue very differently. For her, the First Amendment meant her religion should be treated the same as other religions at an event that appeared to be sponsored by local government, and held in public space.

I won’t tell you how the case turned out, because I may lead that case on campus in the future!

The case raises a number of civic questions: What is fair in a religiously plural democracy? Should Christianity continue to have a privileged position? What constitutes endorsement of religion by the government? Should government officials even be proclaiming a National Day of Prayer? That has been and continues to be contested in the courts. As religious diversity continues to increase, expect more questions like these.

3. Let’s look at one more civic case, called Assigning the Qur’an. It involves the University of North Carolina. In 2002, over 2000 incoming first year students were invited to read a book over the summer, and gather on campus in August for a 2-hr discussion of the book. A faculty committee chose the book; it was entitled Approaching the Qur’an. The Qur’an is the scripture of Islam, of Muslims. Of course, in early 2002, when the book was chosen, the Muslim faith was much in the news, due to the terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001. The committee felt it was time to make understanding Islam part of a liberal arts education.

The book is an English translation of a number of short suras, or chapters that appear toward the end of the Qur’an, chapters very commonly memorized by Muslims. In the book, the author, Michael Sells, offers multiple interpretations of some texts. The book was chosen in part because it demonstrates that Muslims do not all agree on a single interpretation of their scripture, just as Christians do not all agree on a single interpretation of the Bible.

The assignment became the source of tremendous controversy, not so much among students as among parents, state lawmakers, and the national media. Media coverage ranged from Fox Network’s Bill O’Reilly show to Comedy Central, and even the British Broadcasting Corporation covered it. News reporters swarmed the campus. The Family Policy Network, a conservative Evangelical Christian organization, filed a lawsuit against the university on behalf of 3 students, claiming that the assignment infringed on the free religious exercise of the students and violated the establishment clause of the constitution. The North Carolina House of Representatives passed a budget with an amendment that denied funding to any UNC summer reading program devoted to one particular religion; to be funded, it had to include “all known religions.” Some
alumni threatened stop donating to the university.

Well, the Family Policy Network’s lawsuit galvanized the faculty. Many professors saw this as an assault on academic freedom. They worked hard to explain the difference between teaching about a religion vs. teaching that religion as one would in Sunday School. The university had to hire a media consultant to teach the chancellor and faculty members how to deliver their message in memorable “sound bites.”

Eventually the lawsuit was struck down. And the summer reading assignment became optional. In August 65% of incoming students chose to participate, which was about average compared to other years. 178 volunteer discussion leaders led the 2-hour discussion groups. Discussion leaders included the chancellor and provost, the chair of the Board of Trustees, Jewish and Christian chaplains, librarians, graduate students, and faculty from many different departments.

A Civic and Theological Challenge

The kinds of questions raised in these three case studies are popping up all over the country, typically at the local level. We need citizens who can intelligently take part in these discussions. It is fast becoming a civic necessity for each one of us to have some understanding of religious diversity. We don’t need to know an awful lot about our neighbors’ religions; but we do need to have a working familiarity with their values and religious practices. We also need a basic understanding of the civil rights guaranteed to all citizens, no matter what their religion or philosophy is.

I said earlier that there are 2 reasons I do this work. The first reason is civic; the second reason is a matter of faith. My religion calls me to “love my neighbor as myself.” The command to love one’s neighbor as we love ourselves, is a call to treat one’s neighbor with the respect each of us wants for our own religion. This is more than a civic obligation; it is a religious obligation.

Over the past 3 years, most of which I spent studying in Boston, I worked alongside students who were Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Baha’i and Sikh. I visited their places of worship—synagogues, mosques, temples and gurdwaras. And I recognized a core ethic in the people I got to know, the same ethic driving me: caring about our neighbors, wanting justice for everyone.

Karen Armstrong is a renowned scholar of world religions. She uses a single word to describe this ethic of caring for your neighbor: that word is “compassion.” She has a website where people from around the world have signed her Charter of Compassion, written by representatives of major world religions. Karen Armstrong says:

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.¹

Armstrong goes on to say that any interpretation of those religions that calls for violence or degradation of one’s neighbor is to be rejected as a misinterpretation of that faith.

Of course we all know—there are extremists in every religion, who do not represent the mainstream beliefs in that religion. Unfortunately, the extremists are the people who make the news, not the ordinary people in a religion. It’s no wonder Americans know so little about
religions: we teach little or nothing about world religions in public schools. Dr. Diana Eck, who teaches at Harvard and directs the Pluralism Project, was speaking once about how little Americans know about Islam. She said, “Every student in Massachusetts is required to dissect a frog before graduating from high school. Yet they know nothing about the religion of 1/5 of the world’s population.”

The Pew Research Center conducts extensive surveys of the American public. They’ve found that America is one of the most religious of the world’s developed nations, but that America demonstrates a very low level of religious knowledge. In a 2010 survey, 60% of Americans say religion is very important to them. Yet, when they were asked 32 questions covering basic knowledge of world religions, these same people on average, could not score over 50%. That prompted religious scholar Stephen Prothero to declare: “America gets an ‘F’ in religious literacy.”

Here’s the problem. A population that knows almost nothing about religions is easy prey for talking heads and people with political agendas. Today the internet is flooded with misinformation intended to create fear, much of it created by people without academic credentials, and with political agendas. This has been documented in two major studies in the past year, one by the Southern Poverty Law Center and another by the Center for American Progress. As a result of the intentional spread of misinformation about Islam, we are seeing increased intolerance, not only of Islam, but of minority religions in general in the United States.

So, the question, of course, is *What can each one of us do to discover what people with a different religion are really like?* The answer is really quite simple: *get to know them and see how they live their lives.* By what religious ethic do they live? Because our lives and ethics are shaped by the religion in which we participate.

In Omaha, Nebraska, a group of Jews, Christians and Muslims are doing exactly that! They are getting to know each other in a project called the Tri-Faith Initiative.

**Tri-Faith.**

Tri-Faith involves 3 Omaha faith communities—one Jewish, one Christian and one Muslim. They are co-locating to form an intentional interfaith neighborhood, moving to land that was once a golf course. They are building a Jewish synagogue, an Episcopal church, and an Islamic mosque. Each building will be owned solely by the congregation that uses it, but in the center, between their buildings, together they are building the Tri-Faith Center committed to the study of the three religions that all trace their beginning to Abraham. It will be a center for the celebration of religious diversity, offering cultural, artistic, and educational events that model mutual respect. It is believed that this project is the first of its kind in the world.

The first case study I wrote about Tri-Faith tells the story of how it began: leaders from a Reform Jewish synagogue, which was planning to build a larger synagogue, approached a small group of progressive Muslims who they knew were also interested in building. They said *let’s build “next door” to each other…we can share parking lots and save money… but more importantly, we can be in intentional relationship…our people will get to know each other as individuals.* There’s a beautiful story about the first planning meeting to explore how this might work. The meeting took place at a public library. The Jewish delegation from the synagogue entered through one door, carrying trays of food; the Muslim delegation entered through another door, also carrying trays of food. They saw each other and smiled—they already recognized a value they shared in common: hospitality.
Once the Jewish and Muslim groups had decided to build next door to each other, they thought, “Why not invite the 3rd Abrahamic religion to join us?” And so, they extended an invitation to a Christian group, the Episcopal diocese of Nebraska; that invitation came to Rev. Tim Anderson. The case study asks you to put yourself in Rev. Anderson’s shoes, as he considers how to respond. It asks you to think about what Biblical stories or Christian values can guide him as he considers joining in a long-term partnership with Jewish and Muslim congregations. I will tell you the ending: The Episcopal Diocese accepted the invitation, and Rev. Anderson now leads the new Episcopal congregation that will be building on Tri-Faith land.

Construction of all the buildings will not be complete until 2014, but Tri-Faith members have been building relationships since 2006. On special occasions they have worshipped together: a Muslims and Christians have attended a special Jewish Passover Seder. Jews and Christians have shared the iftar feast during Muslim Ramadan. In 2009, 1100 people packed the Omaha Qwest Center for Dinner in Abraham’s Tent. Through the course of the dinner, in sequence, the audience was invited to participate or observe a Jewish Shabbat service, Episcopal Evening Prayers from the Book of Common Prayer, and then Muslim Friday evening prayers.

Many Tri-Faith participants who I interviewed told me that meeting people from other faiths has strengthened their own faith. One woman said, “I had to dig deep and figure out what I believe so I could explain it to other people without sounding like a dummy.”

I wrote a second case study about Tri-Faith, about a crisis they faced in 2009, when war broke out between Israel and Gaza. The Tri-Faith Board members disagreed deeply about who was right and who was wrong in that war. The board was forced to make a public statement regarding the war, due to circumstances beyond their control. This was extremely difficult for them. (I can talk more about this during Q & A.) But let me say this much: Tri-Faith survived that crisis only because the board members had met monthly for 3 years, and they had learned to trust each other. Because of that trust they were able to make a public statement on which they could agree. It’s ironic that Dr. Eck is leading discussion of this case study today, in an undergraduate class at Harvard, just as a new round of rocket attacks between Israel and Gaza has begun again.

The Pal Al Phenomenon.
The importance of simple contact with people who are religiously “other” cannot be overstated. Studies show that the more you know about a religion, the more likely you are to have a positive view about that religion. But even if you know nothing about a religion, knowing one person who practices that religion makes you more likely to have a positive view toward it. ili

We call this the Pal Al Effect, a term coined by researchers Robert Putnam and David Campbell.iv Imagine you have a friend, a pal, who we will call your “Pal Al.” Perhaps he is your friend because you both enjoy video games, and have a good time playing video games together. Eventually you discover he practices a different religion from yours. Because you already have a positive relationship, built around your mutual interest in video games, you are much more likely to have a positive view of his religion.

What’s more, knowing one person of a different religion also makes you more likely to view all other religions more positively. Putnam says, “We can show in a quite rigorous way that when you become friends with someone of a different faith, it not only makes you more open-minded to people of that faith, it makes you more open-minded about people of all other faiths. It makes you more tolerant generally.”v
One other finding of Putnam is important to mention: *these personal relationships are strongest and have the most influence when they involve working together on a project that does some social good.* So if you and your "Pal Al" work together on a Habitat for Humanity house, your positive inclination toward your pal's religious group will be even stronger.

**Interfaith Youth Corp.**
Before I close, I want to tell you about the Interfaith Youth Corp, directed by Eboo Patel. Interfaith Youth Corp builds on the Pal Al Effect by bringing together youth from diverse religious backgrounds to work as teams on service projects. Last year, Interfaith Youth Corp volunteers ran service projects on 106 college campuses, including work on environmental issues, poverty issues, blood drives, and campaigns against sexual violence.

At Wesleyan University an interfaith Fast-a-thon has become an annual event. In its 4th year, 1400 students fasted to raise money for hunger programs, and at the same time highlighted the common practice of fasting in many great religious traditions. In 2010, Interfaith Youth Corp leaders organized students at the Univ. of Illinois; they sent a million meals to Haiti after the earthquake.

These service projects tap into deep religious and humanist values. They break down stereotypes and they build trust. And as students work together, they begin to recognize shared values. Relationships are created, and they grow in respect for each other’s religious beliefs.

Sometimes conversations take place about religion. At Dominican Univ. students organized a “Speed Faith-ing event.” It’s a take-off on “speed dating” where you spend 5 minutes talking to a potential date before moving on to the next seat and next person. In speed-faithing, students sit down for 5-minute conversations about their religious beliefs!

I want to be clear on something: the goal of interfaith conversation is not to arrive at agreement about religion. Just the opposite: The reality of religious differences is a given, and there is no intention of coming to a consensus or watering down faith or smoothing out very real differences between religions. Instead, the intention is to discover ways of relating to each other, across lines of religious difference, so we can work together more effectively for the common good.

**Conclusion.**
I want to leave you with a challenge, as students and faculty, to develop opportunities for interfaith learning and cooperation. Religious diversity is here to stay, and you will encounter it in your professional lives, in hospitals, in courtrooms, in your children’s schools and on the block where you live. We need religiously literate citizens who can promote understanding and create public policies that are fair and just.

Augustana prepares students for global citizenship. It prepares you to contribute to the common good and to strengthen the communities in which you will live. It prepares you to live out your faith. Ideally, that preparation will include engagement with religious diversity.

As a college, you are uniquely situated to do this work. Higher education has always helped American society to respond constructively to social issues—colleges have taken the lead on issues of race, gender equality, and sexual identity—now it’s time for higher education to engage religious identity with the same level of ambition and resources that has been committed to these earlier identity issues. Thank you.


