

Karla R. Suomala, Luther College, Iowa



Karla Suomala is an associate professor in religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. She teaches courses in Bible, Judaism, and gender studies. Currently, Suomala is working on a project that explores ideologies of reform in the Hebrew Bible and is developing a series of case studies that explore religious pluralism from the perspective of college and university students. Recently named the Nena Amundson Distinguished Professor at Luther College, Suomala is about to begin a two year project entitled "Crossing Boundaries: Searching for Wholeness in a Multifaith World," which will involve students, staff, and faculty. Examples of her publications include Moses and God in Dialogue: Exodus 32–34 in Postbiblical Literature (Peter Lang, 2004) and two chapters in Covenantal Conversations: Christians in Dialogue with Jews and Judaism (Fortress Press, 2008).

As I write this piece, a storm continues to swirl around the possibility of a mosque at Ground Zero and there is a national outcry over the on-again, off-again plans of a pastor in Florida to burn copies of the Qur'an. Among the profusion of headlines, sound-bites, and tweets on these issues, one in particular caught my attention: "Koran-burning threats prompt multifaith emergency summit." Leaving aside whether or not the Florida non-incident was over-reported, it was the pairing of "multifaith" and "emergency" that jumped out at me. As an active participant in interreligious dialogue, I can't remember the last time that anyone, especially in the media, has referred to interfaith engagement with such urgency.

But if it's true that we have an interfaith emergency on our hands, how can we work with students to help them develop the knowledge and skills they need to participate productively in these fierce controversies, especially when talking about religion is not something most of them are very comfortable doing? Even where I teach at Luther College, a liberal arts institution with strong denominational ties, many students have a hard time articulating their thoughts about the religious debates that are dominating the news. Throughout the past year, as a Fellow in the AAR/Luce Foundation Summer Seminars on Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology, I had the opportunity to think more deeply about how to engage my

undergraduate students in meaningful conversations about religion in a pluralistic society.

Hooked on Case Studies

During the first week-long meeting of AAR/Luce Fellows in New York City, Rabbi Justus Baird, Director of the [Center for Multifaith Education](#) at Auburn Theological Seminary, introduced our Cohort to a case study approach as a way to invite students to participate in active listening and conversation around interfaith issues. He presented a case that was produced by the [Harvard Pluralism Project](#), and talked about the important work that the organization under Diana Eck's leadership has done in creating materials to foster education about the complex issues that we encounter in a religiously plural society. Since most of my teaching has been in biblical and Judaic studies, I'd never found the occasion to use case studies. But I had applied to be a Fellow precisely because I wanted to bring my interest in interreligious cooperation and dialogue into the classroom. As I thought more about the case that Rabbi Baird presented, I was intrigued and I contacted the Pluralism Project to learn more. Elinor Pierce, Research Director at the Project, gave me permission to use a few of the studies in a week-long seminar at a retreat center I was planning for adults from a variety of religious settings.

All I can say is that I was hooked. I had never seen such dynamic conversation happen as participants grappled with situations in which Muslim taxi drivers at the Minneapolis–Saint Paul International Airport refused to take passengers who were carrying alcohol or the story of a Padma Kuppa in Troy, Michigan, who wanted a Hindi presence at the city's National Day of Prayer. I realized then that I wanted to try something similar with my own students at Luther College and desired to shape a course around the use of real and relevant cases. The cases that I had used with religious leaders and educated laypersons at the retreat worked well because they could imagine themselves in the scenarios the cases depicted. But I realized that many of those situations were far removed from the lives of my college students simply because of their stage in life. Most of my first-year students have had very little connection to the politics of decisions made in their local schools, communities, or religious organizations, which provided the settings for many of the Pluralism Project case studies. So I began to look for some "introductory" cases — cases that involved college and university students around issues that they might confront in their daily lives and experience. Surprisingly, I wasn't able to find cases like this! While case studies are frequently used in other undergraduate disciplines, there are relatively few resources available for instructors in the religious studies classroom (with the exception of ethics) who want to employ the case study method as an effective pedagogical alternative to lectures or presentations. This is particularly true with respect to the availability of case studies that allow students to engage the religiously plural contexts in which they live.

Enter: Interfaith Youth Core

Fortuitously, Eboo Patel, Executive Director of [Interfaith Youth Core](#) (IFYC), arrived on the Luther College campus in early September to speak at the opening convocation. All entering students had just read his book

Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation (Beacon Press, 2010). I didn't know a lot about IFYC, but was intrigued with what I learned. In describing the organization that he founded, Patel says that "IFYC creates programs that illuminate the religious diversity of humankind through strengthening and celebrating young people's existing religious identities, building understanding between religious communities, and encouraging cooperation to serve the common good." The bottom line, says Patel, is that IFYC is advancing a civic ethic rather than a doctrinal ethic; one by which people can build bridges across their respective traditions to work together cooperatively. This bridge-building effort, though, requires a framework, a knowledge base, and a skill set, and talking about actual situations, Patel and his staff have found, helps to achieve these goals.

To make a long story short, IFYC didn't have a curriculum of case studies and I was interested in writing one. So I worked closely with Cassie Meyer, Director of Content at IFYC, over the Fall on developing a project that would involve my writing a series of case studies in collaboration with them, and would then be distributed through IFYC's website. Each case would feature a student or group of students dealing with an interfaith situation from campus life, and which highlighted scenarios of not only conflict but cooperation as well. In developing these cases, we agreed that we wanted to provide college students with the opportunity to explore religious pluralism in ways that connect more immediately to their own contexts and experience. We had the sense that once students have the opportunity to see that their own settings and interests are relevant to understanding the dynamics of religious pluralism and that they can be the primary agents in interfaith deliberation, they will be better equipped to explore issues that go beyond their frame of reference.

The Cases

One year and many cases later, I've had the opportunity to meet and interview some of the most inspiring young people on college and university campuses throughout the United States. For the case, "Westboro is Coming to Town: What Do U Stand 4?" I talked to Anand Venkatkrishnan and Ansaf Kareem, both seniors at Stanford University, about how they started a student group called F.A.I.T.H. (Faiths Acting in Togetherness and Hope) with the goal of changing and adding depth to interfaith discussion on the Stanford University campus. Anand and Ansaf told me about how students in their organization were instrumental in developing a response and then mobilizing students to act in time for Westboro Baptist Church's arrival at Stanford to picket the Jewish and LGBT communities on campus. In reading this case, students are encouraged to think about the implications of their responding to a group like Westboro that thrives on conflict, as well as talk about ways that one-time events like this can be strengthened through follow-up and reflection.

Last week, students in one of my classes began their academic year reading the case, “Study or Indoctrination?: Reading the Qur’an at UNC” which features Mary Ellen Giess, who was a first-year student at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in Fall 2002. Mary Ellen was one of nearly 4,000 entering students who read *Approaching the Qur’an* by Michael Sells as that year’s summer reading program. Students had not even arrived on campus that Fall when controversy erupted around the state of North Carolina about the selection of this particular text. Students, faculty, administration, lawmakers, lawyers, and independent organizations got involved in heated debates and lawsuits that continued throughout the year. From a student’s perspective, the case asks, was this book a good choice? While most of the cases I’ve written deal with situations that have taken place in the last six to eight months, I decided to add this case because the issues are still, unfortunately, so relevant.

In my Luther classroom, most students couldn’t figure out what the “big deal” was; of course the entering University of North Carolina students should have done the summer reading — it was so close to 9/11 after all. They had a much harder time identifying with the side that sued the University of North Carolina over their text selection. That is what brings us to today, almost literally. Many students like mine simply can’t identify with people who want to burn copies of the Qur’an or who oppose the building of a mosque at Ground Zero. But that is exactly what we all need to figure out — what is motivating the very real anger, fear, and hostility among members of our society; who are not necessarily a tiny minority?

Cases will be made available this Fall on the FYC Bridge-builders site in the [Resources](#) section: <http://www.fycbridge-builders.ning.com/>