

## Voice of the Other

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### Key words

*Chaplaincy in higher education; diversity, inclusion, othering, Pagan chaplaincy, pluralism*

Whenever a new experience or opportunity is on the horizon, a sense of excitement always follows. That's how I felt when I first heard about the 2012 Global Conference for Chaplains in Higher Education, and the feeling persisted even as I checked into my lodgings. I was sure I was not the only one filled with anticipation; after all, this conference happens only once every four years. What an opportunity for all in attendance to connect, share ideas, gain understanding of the diverse nature of faith, and begin to talk about religious pluralism on college campuses. However, my understanding of what would happen at the conference was, in a word, naïve. I soon learned that there was very little room for the voice of the “other”, let alone for discussion surrounding religious pluralism.

I attended three workshops the first day, including women's spirituality and a discussion on whether or not religions have a common language. I had chosen the workshops because, at least based on title, they all seemed connected to what I do on a daily basis. As I navigated my way through the day, I started by looking for

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information on how other colleges integrate spiritual connections into students' lives, while at the same time making interfaith settings work.

What I found instead were conference attendees with a variety of attitudes, ranging from downright patronizing toward minority religions to absolute denial of the validity of spirituality as a faith/belief identification. The term "multi-faith" was openly scoffed at, as were any faith traditions considered to fall under the category of "other" as a religious designation on forms and within Chapels. These categories were created to identify those people who do not fit neatly into any "mainstream" description. Some participants audibly chuckled at discussions around students self-defining their own faiths and at their attempts to identify where they fit in the overall landscape of belief. By the end of the day, I was in shock and my feeling of anticipation had been replaced by fear wrapped inside of anger.

The anger I felt led to the realization that I did not belong at the conference; I was not wanted there. My voice, the voice of the other, was not welcomed by the majority of participants. I felt stripped of all safety nets, completely vulnerable, alone and unwanted. I felt that my voice had been taken; it was not a safe place for me to openly express my opinions. I became the elephant in the room when attendees learned what religion I represented. The attention was unwelcome. When I stopped even stating my faith tradition and just listened, the conversations changed. All I had to do was keep quiet, and everyone just assumed my beliefs. I am a white, middle aged female and therefore, they "knew" that I was a Christian. I am not. I am a Pagan, the "other" that was being openly laughed at.

I did not attend the conference alone. I was one of three Chaplains from our University accompanying our Dean and, as a result, I did have at least some degree of support. I was, however, the only non-Christian Chaplain in our group. As the Pagan Chaplain, I serve a diverse group of faith traditions that fall under that umbrella. I am familiar with being an outsider, the one who works with different definitions for terms that are common to mainstream religions. I did not expect there to be another Pagan in attendance, and I don't believe there was. That did not matter. What *did* matter was being part of something larger, something where diversity would be encouraged and interfaith dialog welcomed. I was sorely disappointed in what transpired, and the reality of faith on campuses came crashing home.

Now that the conference is a memory, I understand why a constant stream of students, faculty and staff call, email or just drop in to talk with me. They want to belong, to be accepted for who they are. They're seeking answers, or at least

reassurance that they are okay and not bad people. They come to me because they do not want to be judged or told that they have to believe in the very structures with which they cannot reconcile. They do not feel safe or welcome in mainstream religions, and their feelings are based in very real experiences. They represent the "other," and what the conference made me realize was that traditional mainstream religions are simply not welcoming this new generation of faith. By contrast, the alternative or "other" faith traditions are offering a broader, more accepting face for people to connect with.

In the eyes of the disenfranchised, mainstream religion does not provide care for those individuals who are hurting most – the ones having a crisis of faith, who are questioning the traditional structures that have caused them pain. Mainstream religion teaches only a few ways to believe and one thing to believe in, and if you do not fit those molds you are ridiculed. Why would anyone want to subject themselves to such humiliation? Students are not walking away from faith; they are walking away from religion - because it has no place for them in this changing world. It is not accepting, nor is it tolerant. If I, as a Chaplain solid in my faith, felt completely lost, unwanted, and under attack, I can only imagine how students feel when they perceive no safe haven within the sacred places on a campus.

Amidst the bad experience I had at the conference, I did find glimmers of hope that diversity and pluralism could exist. I found two individuals eager to discuss interfaith work in the spirit of honest and true sharing. One was from Wales, the other from the US Air Force Academy. In retrospect, they were the lights of the conference for me. As I spoke to one of them regarding my feelings about neither belonging nor being welcome, she stated a simple thought: that maybe I was the one who *needed to* be there; maybe I belonged there to remind people that not everyone fits into neat faith boxes and that it was time to recognize that. I pondered that for quite some time while reflecting on the conference. There was great wisdom in that thought, and only now can I begin to understand what my deities wanted me to learn from this experience.

The lesson here is to realize that it is our duty to change what is defined as valid regarding faith. Being spiritual is just as valid as being religious; each is a personal choice of how an individual relates to what they accept as divine. Everyone must feel safe to express what they are feeling and believing in order for us to consider ourselves religiously diverse and practicing pluralism. It is our job to create those safe, sacred spaces that people are searching for.

Given the opportunity will I attend the Global Conference again? Yes. Minority religions deserve to be seen, heard and known. The voice of the “other” should never go silent.

