A Case Study of Faith-Based Community Organizations in Chicago, IL

Report of the Inclusive America Project Allison K. Ralph, Lead Author





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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
THE RELIGIOUS PLURALISM MULTIPLIER EFFECT
Figure 1. The virtuous feedback loop of religious pluralism
Figure 2. Religious pluralism contributes to prosocial work
THREE CASE STUDIES FROM CHICAGO
Temple Sholom of Chicago
The Syrian Community Network
Faith in Place
CONCLUSION14

INTRODUCTION

A key component of the mission of the Inclusive America Project (IAP) is to investigate the ways in which religious pluralism supports the thriving of American democracy and society. This case study shows the complex network of inter-reliance between houses of worship, academic institutions, and faith-based nonprofits, and highlights several specific examples of the ways in which a thriving religious pluralism promotes other non-religious prosocial work in local communities. These cases were drawn from a November 2019 IAP convening of faith-based civic engagement organizations that are based mostly in Chicago, IL. During this convening, we asked participants to map themselves onto our multi-component framework of religious pluralism.¹

The resulting network analysis reveals that the participant organizations rely on each other's successes in the field of religious pluralism in a virtuous feedback loop and that their interests are deeply intertwined. Following the November convening, we conducted interviews with a few of the organizations to ask about their prosocial work. Those interviews show that faith-based nonprofits' prosocial work is dependent on the system of religious pluralism. This dependency has direct implications for philanthropy and policy leaders, even if those leaders are interested solely in prosocial outputs and see themselves as separate from the sphere of religious pluralism. Our analysis finds that these key stakeholders should nevertheless be concerned with the wellbeing of the system of religious pluralism as a whole.

¹ See Many People, Many Faiths, One Nation: A Primer on Religious Pluralism for information on this framework. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/justice-and-society-program/many-people.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Religious pluralism is a system of inter-disciplinary and highly specialized component networks. Each of these component networks advances goals that collectively enable religious pluralism to thrive.
- These components are Religious Freedom; Religious Literacy and Competency; Diversity and Representation in Media; Hate Crime Prevention; Thriving Religious Communities; Religion in Diversity Equity, and Inclusion; and Multi-, Intra-, and Inter-Faith Engagement.
- Faith-based nonprofits and houses of worship rely on these components to survive and thrive, but they also advance these areas in a virtuous feedback loop. In effect, they multiply the outcomes of each other's work.
- Because these organizations rely on these components to survive, the prosocial work they do in the world also depends on the components and system of religious pluralism.

Regardless of whether they are faith-based themselves, organizations that wish to advance prosocial work through faith-based partners have a stake in the success of religious pluralism.

- Regardless of whether they are faith-based themselves, organizations that wish to advance prosocial work through faith-based partners have a stake in the success of religious pluralism.
- Because of this virtuous feedback loop, philanthropic organizations
 that support faith-based organizations and the components of
 religious pluralism also contribute to the multiplier effect.

THE RELIGIOUS PLURALISM MULTIPLIER EFFECT

Religious pluralism is a system of several inter-disciplinary and highly specialized networks, each of which advances goals that collectively enable religious pluralism to thrive. IAP has captured these goals in its religious pluralism framework: Religious Freedom; Religious Literacy; Diversity and Representation in Media; Hate Crime Prevention; Thriving Religious Communities; Religion in Diversity Equity, and Inclusion; and Multi-, Intra-, and Inter-Faith Engagement.² Each represents an element of the Religious Pluralism system, but each is also a system of actors and institutions in its own right.

The system of work in *Religious Freedom*, for example, includes individuals and institutions in the academic study of religious freedom law, nonprofit legal centers that take up cases in the courts, and public intellectuals who make this complex knowledge accessible to others. These individuals and institutions, by their separate and specialized work, make it possible for others to do their own work, be it holding a religious service or leading voter registration efforts, without being restrained or threatened by a lack of religious freedom. The support of the system of religious freedom does not in all cases involve direct support for one organization or individual. Instead, it contributes to an overall enabling environment for all organizations and individuals that rely on religious freedom as a right, and therefore from which all benefit.

Other systems of religious pluralism likewise have ripple effects as well. *Diversity and Representation in Media* includes journalists, media

² See Many People, Many Faiths, One Nation: A Primer on Religious Pluralism for more details on IAP's articulation of this system, its component areas, and their definitions. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/justice-and-society-program/many-people.

companies, institutions that teach or decide awards for these arts, actresses, and artists. Each of these has their own particular work to do in the world. Improving representation for all minorities and the maligned across these sectors allows them to tell their own stories, and to be examples for others. *Diversity and Representation in Media*, through broad effects on culture generally, pushes back against stereotypes, diminishing the rates of hate speech and hate crimes. For example, more Muslim journalists in newsrooms would bring change

to the strongly negative coverage of Muslims.³ More nuanced coverage can support thriving religious communities where community members tell their own positive stories for the benefit of the general public and themselves.

Diverse faith communities are also the wellspring of some 228,000 nonprofit organizations.

Thriving Religious Communities are

a foundational element of religious pluralism, and though different religious communities may have similar challenges (declining rates of attendance, fast-changing modern culture coming up against long-held traditions), each too has its own unique needs. Some communities rely on strong hierarchical leadership, maintained through sanctioned seminaries that teach leadership and pastoral skills. Some rely exclusively on lay leadership, or charismatic leadership that is more flexible than institutional systems, but that may lack the resources for developing steady theology or dedicated spaces for leadership development. To thrive, religious communities need various kinds of organizational supports through associations, schools, and organizational leadership training.

America's diverse faith communities are also the wellspring of some 228,000 nonprofit organizations.⁴ Many faith-based organizations,

³ Erik Bleich and A. Maurits van der Veen, "Analysis | Newspaper Coverage of Muslims Is Negative. And It's Not Because of Terrorism.," Washington Post, accessed June 25, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/12/20/newspaper-coverage-of-muslims-is-negative-and-its-not-because-of-terrorism/; "Terror Attacks By Muslims Get 357 Percent More Media Coverage Than Other Terror Attacks, Study Shows - Georgia State University News - College of Arts and Sciences, University Research," News Hub (blog), February 19, 2019, https://news.gsu.edu/2019/02/19/terror-attacks-by-muslims-get-disproportionate-news-coverage/.

⁴ Brad R. Fulton, "Religious Organizations: Crosscutting the Nonprofit Sector," in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Patricia Bromley, 3rd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

whose work is made possible by religious pluralism, pour their efforts back into that system in a virtuous and reinforcing feedback loop. They support the thriving of their own faith communities through scholarship funds for their local youth to go to seminary or they provide legal support for their members who were illegally fired for wearing religious garb such as yarmulkes, crosses, or turbans at work.

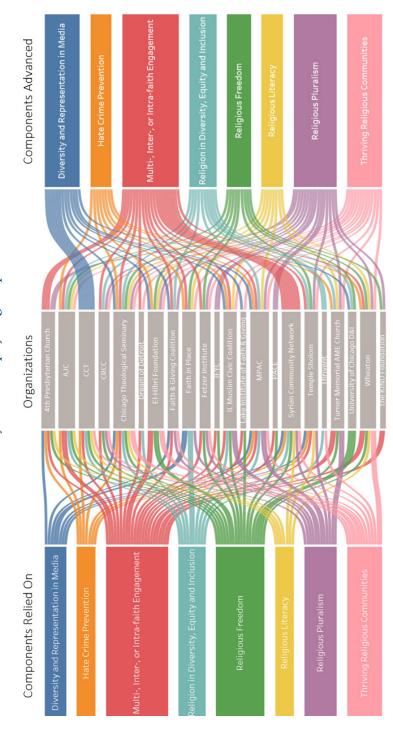
In short, each of the seven specialized systems contributes to a broader enabling environment, working together in a way that allows religious pluralism to thrive.

IAP asked participants of our November 2019 convening to map themselves onto our system of religious pluralism, telling us where they rely on or advance each of the component areas or the system as a whole. With this data, we developed a small-scale network analysis of the ways these organizations rely on each other's enabling work. Twenty-three organizations are represented below in the center column of Figure 1, including local Chicago houses of worship, local and national faith-based nonprofits, academic centers and seminaries, and funders. The leftmost column shows the component areas of religious pluralism on which the organizations in the center rely. The threads between them represent that connection. On the right are the component areas of religious pluralism the organizations advance, the threads likewise representing the connection between them. The dense web of connections between these organizations is a visual representation of the reality that the component areas of religious pluralism are deeply intertwined in a complex virtuous feedback loop. Through this web of advancement and reliance, these organizations multiply the impact of each other's work.

Additionally, the whole religious pluralism system in turn supports religious institutions including houses of worship and faith-based nonprofits in prosocial work that benefits the larger community.

Organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Jewish Council for Urban Affairs, the Sikh Coalition, and over 200,000 others run food banks, conduct voter registration, build community wellness centers, run health clinics, offer financial literacy courses or housing assistance, and conduct innumerable other good works for any of their neighbors in

 $FIGURE \ 1$ The virtuous feedback loop of religious pluralism



need. These organizations tell us they rely on the many systems and on the whole functioning system of religious pluralism in order to do their

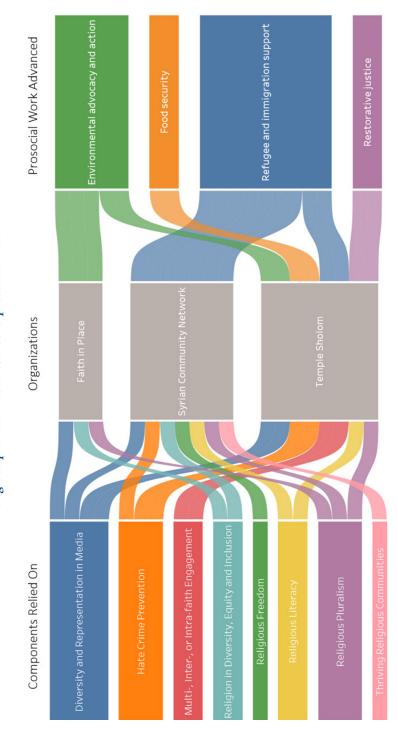
"Organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Jewish Council for Urban Affairs, and the Sikh Coalition... are the embodiment of the system of religious pluralism in action."

prosocial work in the world. These faith-based organizations are the embodiment of the system of religious pluralism in action.

In follow-up interviews with participants of our Chicago gathering, they told us more about the prosocial work that they do in the world, and confirmed that their prosocial work also relies on the component systems of religious pluralism. Like the full map above, Figure 2 shows the organizations in the center and the components of religious pluralism on

which they rely on the left. However, the column on the right now shows the prosocial work the organizations advance.

FIGURE 2
Religious pluralism contributes to prosocial work.



THREE CASE STUDIES FROM CHICAGO

The figures above show that these organizations both contribute to the virtuous circle of religious pluralism as well as perform prosocial work in the world, all while they rely on various component areas of religious pluralism. The case studies below explore these relationships in more detail.

Temple Sholom of Chicago

In addition to their internal activities, Temple Sholom of Chicago⁵ embraces the concept in Judaism of "Tikkun Olam" (repairing the world) through engagement in a multitude of community service

"The synagogue serves the Jewish people in order for the Jewish people to serve the community."

initiatives that transcend cultural and religious boundaries. The synagogue relies on numerous components of religious pluralism to do this work, including *Multi-*, *Intra-*, *and Inter-Faith Engagement*, *Religious Literacy*, and *Religious Freedom*. In particular, Rabbi Shoshanah Conover notes how deeply

the synagogue relies on partnerships with other religious and secular organizations for supply drives and outreach events, leveraging on those networks and relationships to broaden its impact in the larger community. It also learns from these organizations how to engage effectively with particular issues and communities. For example, Temple Sholom is heavily involved with a local juvenile detention center where they try to bring a more human approach to young people's lives

⁵ See https://www.sholomchicago.org/ for more information on Temple Sholom of Chicago.

by striving to create a greater emphasis on restorative justice in the detention center and by allowing youth to share their own stories. This work inherently involves partnership and learning from organizations with ties to the impacted communities, such as the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, a Catholic nonprofit in Chicago that serves families and communities impacted by incarceration and violence with restorative justice approaches.

Temple Sholom also advances many components of religious pluralism, including *Thriving Religious Communities* and *Religion in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.* The synagogue has a myriad of social groups and support services for different segments of its congregation, including seniors,

young people, families, and LGBTQ members. It offers religious instruction and services, as well as volunteer and community outreach opportunities that serve the Jewish community and their wider community in Chicago. According to Rabbi Conover, the synagogue serves the Jewish people in order for the Jewish people to serve the community.

For Temple Sholom of Chicago, the health and vitality of its faith community directly supports its broader social service work in A more balanced approach to media coverage, as along with initiatives such as Banana Republic's advertisement with hijabi models, has a tangible effect on normalizing the hijab and easing racial and religious bias against Muslims.

the broader community. In turn, the Temple's effectiveness in the community is greatly aided by its interfaith partnerships. In other words, the system of Religious Pluralism creates an environment that both supports Temple Sholom itself and fosters its prosocial work.

The Syrian Community Network

The Syrian Community Network⁶ works to serve, connect, and empower Syrian refugees and Muslims in Chicago by supporting resettlement through housing, food security, education, and more. To do this work,

⁶ See https://syriancommunitynetwork.org/scn/ for more information on the Syrian Community Network.

the organization relies on the broader enabling environment of religious pluralism, and in particular, the elements of *Religious Freedom, Diversity and Representation in the Media*, and *Hate Crime Prevention*. Founder and Executive Director Suzanne Akhras Sahoul explains that Religious Freedom fosters an environment in which Muslim migrants often feel even more connected to their faith than in their home country. In the United States, individuals have the liberty to come together, build relationships, create organizations, and practice their religion freely, which is not the case in many other countries. Sahoul also argues that *Hate Crime Prevention* and *Diversity and Representation in the Media* are two critical pillars of religious pluralism that benefit the Syrian

This improved media representation in turn improves public perceptions and understanding of Syrian refugees, and thereby helps the Syrian Community Network's own and others' ability to support Muslim refugees as they navigate their new communities trying to find employment, housing, and social service support.

Community Network's work for Syrian refugees. Stereotypes associated with the hijab and a overwhelmingly negative news stories about Muslims have a tremendous impact on the daily lives of the Network's beneficiaries. A more balanced approach to media coverage, as along with initiatives such as Banana Republic's advertisement with hijabi models, has a tangible effect on normalizing the hijab and easing racial and religious bias against Muslims.

Syrian Community Network is also helping to advance the religious pluralism component of *Multi, Inter-, and Intra-Faith Engagement,* as it brings

together volunteers of many faiths including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in its social service outreach to Syrian refugees. These multi-faith volunteers share similar values across their different religions and come together because each of their faiths "calls them to do more." Syrian Community Network is also supporting *Diversity and Representation in the Media*, particularly at the local level. The organization is often asked to do positive, local, personal media stories about its beneficiaries, including stories about hijabi women's successes. They also host events that showcase the stories of Syrian and Muslim refugees, such as a conversation with the director of the Oscar-nominated film *For Sama*, which

documents the life of a student in Aleppo who bore witness to the conflict and humanitarian crisis there. These are examples of the ways in which Syrian Community Network is helping to advance a system of positive media representation for Muslims. This improved media representation in turn improves public perceptions and understanding of Syrian refugees, and thereby helps the Syrian Community Network's own and others' ability to support Muslim refugees as they navigate their new communities trying to find employment, housing, and social service support.

Faith in Place

Faith in Place⁷ is on the forefront of faith-led environmental initiatives, working with diverse religious traditions in Chicago and beyond on energy and climate, sustainable food and land use, and

water preservation issues. Executive Director Brian Sauder emphasizes the tremendous social capital within and across religious communities, and the power they have to create positive change in the world when mobilized. Faith in Place relies on *Religious Literacy, Multi-, Intra-, and Inter-faith Engagement*, and *Thriving Religious Communities* as critical enablers of its

You learn so much more by having genuine conversations, by being vulnerable, and asking questions in those situations than you do in a classroom or book.

environmental work. For example, while working at a long-term multifaith gardening project, Sauder met a Muslim man and was able to learn more about Islam over the course of days of conversations. Later, Sauder observed, "you learn so much more by having genuine conversations, by being vulnerable, and asking questions in those situations than you do in a classroom or book." That inter-faith exchange advanced greater *Religious Literacy*, which also enabled both men to feel common cause in their environmental activities together.

Faith in Place also advances *Multi-*, *Intra-*, *and Inter-Faith Engagement* through its environmental activities. It has built a coalition of faith partners from a variety of traditions, including Native religious groups,

⁷ See https://www.faithinplace.org/ for more information on Faith in Place.

Jewish groups, and a range of Christians, such as Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, Quakers, and Evangelicals. Faith in Place invites all of these faith groups into a fellowship focused on preserving the environment, drawing on common values and beliefs across each religious tradition. In creating such a diverse, pluralistic platform, Faith in Place has established itself as a leader in the faith-based environmental movement.

In addition to their collective action, Faith in Place also supports its partners in establishing Green Teams in their faith communities and empowers them to connect their spiritual practices and traditions with the shared concerns about the common resources of land, water, air, and justice. Green Teams educate their members, motivate their faith community to incorporate environmental consciousness into all activities, and celebrate accomplishments. Faith in Place helps to showcase and amplify partner projects in order to demonstrate the wider impact of the network's activities.

CONCLUSION

Faith-based institutions and organizations play a critical role in supporting social service delivery and advocacy around causes including economic and environmental justice. Our case study provides evidence of the ways in which this prosocial work is deeply intertwined with a

complex system of Religious Pluralism, enabling faith-based institutions to serve both their own faith communities as well as the broader communities in which they are situated. Each organization in our case study depends on the system, while simultaneously helping to reinforce it. And within this eco-system of religious pluralism, faith-based institutions — including houses of worship and faith-based nonprofits — are able to do their social service work, which ranges from environmental preservation to justice and violence prevention, to refugee resettlement, and more. Philanthropic

For those who support the work of these organizations and the communities they serve – formerly incarcerated youth, Syrian refugees, the homeless – it is important to recognize that religious pluralism is the foundation on which this work is made possible.

support for faith-based organizations and religious pluralism or its component parts also has a multiplier effect precisely because religious pluralism and the diverse organizations that participate in it are part of a virtuous feedback loop.

For those who support the work of these organizations and the communities they serve – formerly incarcerated youth, Syrian refugees, the homeless – it is important to recognize that religious pluralism is the

foundation on which this work is made possible. In addition, faith-based communities are often the preferred actors to conduct some of this work, because of their credibility with a target population, because of their relationships and standing within communities, and sometimes because they are seen as nonpartisan actors. In some cases, the standing of faith-based organizations may mean that they are the only legitimate actor to

"I think foundations and funders miss an opportunity when they don't work with the faith community – we are accountable, can deliver, we aren't going anywhere, we are loyal to our causes." engage in a certain kind of work. We need these groups to be healthy, to thrive, and to have an environment that enables them to be active in the world.

It is therefore imperative that all those who are interested in the prosocial work that communities of faith perform in the world—be they funders, policymakers, or secular nonprofits—should also be interested in the system of religious pluralism. As Faith in Place Outreach Director Veronica Kyle put it, "other than

educational institutions, there is no other place in the community that gathers people consistently. I think foundations and funders miss an opportunity when they don't work with the faith community – we are accountable, can deliver, we aren't going anywhere, we are loyal to our causes." For this reason, regardless of faith tradition or belief, we should all care about religious pluralism.

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