

[00:00:00.39] ANTHONY SIS: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees. Religion, faith, spirituality-- what do all these three words have in common? On today's show, we'll be having an interview with Oliver Goodrich, Associate Dean of Spirituality and Meaning Making and Director of Cornell United Religious Work to help us understand the similarities and the differences between these three terms. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:33.49] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:34.96] ANTHONY SIS: And you're listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:00:37.84] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:59.09] Oliver, thank you so much for joining us on today's show. Why don't we start by having you introduce yourself in terms of the role that you have here at Cornell, as well as the pronouns that you use and any other additional information you want to share with our listeners.

[00:01:14.60] OLIVER GOODRICH: Sure, thanks, Anthony. And Thanks, Toral. My name is Oliver Goodrich. I use the pronouns he, him. And I serve as the associate dean of students for spirituality and meaning making and director of Cornell United Religious Work.

[00:01:28.44] And it's been my joy to be part of the Cornell community since February of 2020, which if you're doing your math in your head was a super fun time to join the Cornell community.

[00:01:41.72] ANTHONY SIS: Right. So it was before the quarantine, during the quarantine?

[00:01:45.51] OLIVER GOODRICH: Yeah--

[00:01:45.74] ANTHONY SIS: It was right before--

[00:01:46.25] OLIVER GOODRICH: So right before, yeah. I started on February 10. And got in about a month or so before the infamous go-remote day, March 13. And then had a short time after that where my dean of students colleagues and I working on campus to support the Access Fund, supporting some of our students who needed additional assistance as they transitioned off campus.

[00:02:09.02] But basically, since middle of March, we have been working remote now. So six weeks on campus and six-plus months remote now.

[00:02:16.64] TORAL PATEL: Yes, yes.

[00:02:17.45] ANTHONY SIS: Wow.

[00:02:18.23] TORAL PATEL: It's been interesting times.

[00:02:19.88] ANTHONY SIS: Indeed, interesting times to be a part of the world or the workforce, you know? So thank you. Thank you for introducing yourself. And as you know already, we start always each episode with a question of the day. This time, it is my turn to ask the question.

[00:02:35.72] And the question itself is not specifically tied to the topic we're going to talk about. But my answer is tied to this topic. So the question that I have for us today is, what social identity do you least think about? So in terms of your race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, the many different social identities, which one do you think about the least?

[00:02:57.92] And the reason why I ask this question is because when I thought about this topic, it is probably the one identity that I do think about the least, particularly because I think about it from a privileged perspective, growing up Roman Catholic in terms of faith. But it also-- that identity in particular, is not one that I strongly resonate with to this day. Like, I don't necessarily practice this particular faith anymore. But I did grow up with the traditions and celebrations of the Roman Catholic religion. So that's the reason why I thought about this particular identity in terms of this answer and kind of how it ties to this particular topic.

[00:03:33.62] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, for me, I don't know that it's something I think about the least, but maybe something that I talk about the least is definitely my religion and faith. And I think it's just because I truly feel like it's one of those things that I don't have to really share with anybody. It is part of who I am, and you know, it does take up a lot of space in my life.

[00:03:51.21] It's also something that doesn't impact me on a day-to-day basis. So I guess it's one that I don't talk about. So I think for me, same thing, that it's just not something that I think about a lot, just because it is just ingrained in who I am. But also in terms of conversations and stuff, it's just not something that comes up a lot for me.

[00:04:09.41] OLIVER GOODRICH: This is fascinating conversation. And it's really interesting to hear both of your responses. Because of the work that I do in Cornell United Religious Work, hardly a day goes by that I don't think about religion and spirituality. My personal spirituality is very much a part of my daily life. And I try to engage in spiritual practices.

[00:04:27.26] And most days, I'm talking with students or colleagues about their religious identities. So my answer will probably be different than both of yours. And in my role as part of the Dean of Students team, we are often accompanying students in conversation around the intersection of their identities, right, their race, ethnicity, their

socioeconomic status, their sexual orientation, and gender. And in various ways in those conversations, different social identities that I hold come out in different ways.

[00:04:55.23] But I would say one of the identities that I hold that I probably reflect on the least and is least salient in the work that I do is probably my ability-disability status. I identify as an able-bodied person, at least temporarily. And particularly in this work-from-home climate, I am not in spaces where I'm encountering disabled folks. And I find that it's not on my radar in the same way that it was when I was inhabiting the shared public space of Cornell's campus. So I think that probably would be the one that I'm thinking about least actively and certainly an area where I still want to grow and strive to be a better ally and advocate for our fellow community members and for our students.

[00:05:36.96] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah, I'm super glad that you brought it up, Oliver, is that different identities kind of show up in different moments in different spaces and definitely take more precedent than in other spaces. But I do think that for myself, going back to this religion, peace, faith peace, that it's not something that I think about as a barrier in a lot of spaces, or even is something that I feel the need to talk about.

[00:05:58.60] But it is something that, similar to what you were saying with ability and being a stronger ally, stronger advocate-- definitely something I'm trying to strive for in my own personal practice as well, as well as in the work that I do professionally. And so part of why we're doing this show, right, is to be able to talk about this topic in a way that I think allows people to feel like they're also being heard. Because I do think that this is a topic where 20-something episodes in this series, and we have really talked about this.

[00:06:26.83] I'm super excited to have a conversation with you about this particular concept of-- we talk about a lot of things, spirituality, there's faith, there's religion. But before we get into that particular piece, I also wanted to ask you a little bit about the office that you work in, in terms of the name I thought was really interesting when I first heard it, right, so the Office of Spirituality and Meaning Making. So why don't we start there in terms of your approach, the philosophy of your office. You know, what is it exactly that that name entails and what was the intentionality behind that?

[00:06:58.78] OLIVER GOODRICH: Yeah, I love the name. And I find it to be really intriguing too. When I applied for this job a year ago now, so back in the fall of 2019, I remember seeing the position title and reading it and just almost laughing out loud at how like silly and exciting this title was.

[00:07:16.12] A friend of mine joked that it sounded like something from Willy Wonka, right? Like, we are the dreamers of dreams. We are the makers of meaning.

[00:07:23.62] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:07:25.54] OLIVER GOODRICH: It's just like too good to be true kind of title. The history, as I understand it, goes back-- well, so Cornell United Religious Work was

founded in late 1920s-- in 1929. It's the first of its kind intentionally multifaith college campus ministry organization in the US, right? So really groundbreaking work.

[00:07:45.49] And it sort of runs counter to the narrative of people who think of Cornell as a non-religious space. And certainly, that was part of how Ezra Cornell founded the institution, as I understand it. But people think of Cornell as somebody who didn't want religion to be a part of a Cornell education at all. And my understanding in the research I've done in conversations with chaplains is that actually Cornell himself was a spiritual person-- was a deeply religious person-- and wanted spiritual formation to be part of any Cornelian's experience.

[00:08:17.83] He just didn't want any one particular religious group to have a controlling interest in the conversation. And so from very early in the founding of the university, we had different religious groups sending pastors and rabbis-- initially, it was just Jewish and Christian folks, and it's expanded over the years-- but sending religious professionals to support students so they could have religious practice and spiritual practice be a part of their holistic education and their time at Cornell.

[00:08:44.98] It wasn't until the 2000s, until this century that we broadened the name to this idea of spirituality and meaning making. That came about under the leadership of our former dean of students, Vijay Pendakur, who was reading some of the research and data that was coming out. You know, a lot of folks will point to the data coming out of the Pew Research Forum, which is showing a decline in religious affiliation from a lot of groups, particularly from the major religious groups, right? Those have been on decline for a number of years now.

[00:09:15.88] And a lot of chaplains nationally are trying to grapple with, what does this mean for engaging students around spiritual formation? And Vijay had the insight that, even if people didn't formally affiliate with a religious institution, it didn't mean that they didn't have a desire to understand spiritual practice or to engage in meaning making kinds of practices. And really, we just needed a way to create an opening for those students to find a space in Cornell where they could engage in those conversations.

[00:09:44.99] So his genius, or his insight was to create this office that would sort of serve as the umbrella for religious and spiritual life at Cornell and open up the kinds of conversations that have historically happened in chaplaincies or in religious spaces to all students, regardless of how they identify. And so over the last few years, my predecessors and now myself are trying to find ways to open up those conversations around, how do we find a sense of meaning or purpose or grounding in life to all students at Cornell, regardless of how they identify with a particular religious tradition?

[00:10:20.17] ANTHONY SIS: That is fascinating. I feel like I just learned so much about Cornell's history in that story. Thank you for sharing that.

[00:10:27.45] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, and it actually speaks to Ezra Cornell's mission, right, of the any person, any study. That kind of ties into that, where it's not necessarily

like you said-- it's not one religion or one faith having the most conversations. And it's just really anybody.

[00:10:41.32] So the word spirituality, faith, religion it could apply to anybody. And that's what I really like about that philosophy. And so, Oliver, when I listen to you speak just now, your passion really comes through for this type of work. So I think it would be great to just transition slightly right now and get to know you a little bit more. So what motivates you to do this kind of work?

[00:11:00.58] OLIVER GOODRICH: Well, that a great question. Thanks, Toral. I love this work. You know, people joke that I'm like a professional Christian, or in this context, professional spiritual person, right, because it's something that I love and get paid to do and do feel passionate about.

[00:11:13.96] I think part of this for me comes from just my own life experience. I have been in spiritual and religious circles my entire life in one way, shape, or form. I was raised in a Baptist Christian household. And being in spiritual spaces, very much shaped my own upbringing, my personal life.

[00:11:35.02] In fact, prior to Cornell, I think in my entire professional experience I-- apart from just brief stints working in retail-- I have always worked in faith-based institutions. And have really found a sense of personal resonance with the mission and the aims and the kinds of conversations that can happen from faith-based institutions. So it's sort of unique for me to be in a place like Cornell.

[00:12:01.51] But for me, it comes from having seen the value that spirituality can offer to people to help uncover and unlock a sense of purpose and passion about, not just what they do, but why they do what they do. I had a professor in graduate school who encouraged us to think about having a sense of like a personal mission. And he actually invited us to write a personal mission statement.

[00:12:25.57] And I really grappled with this. It was a hard exercise. And, of course, in the midst of graduate school, I had a lot of uncertainty about my own sense of purpose and where I wanted to go long term. And for me, at the core, after reflecting on this question for a long time, I came down to a sense of wanting to help people. I feel like I'm at my best when I'm able to help people.

[00:12:46.93] And my sense of mission is to help people find their purpose. And I believe that spiritual spaces can really do this when they're at their best. We all know from the news, if we're reading the same news, that religious organizations haven't always done a great job about this. But I believe that there is a kind of unique space that happens in spiritual life on a college campus, because of the fact that we have this academic freedom and in a certain kind of liberty with regard to these conversations that really is generative and opening and can help people dig down and find some deep truths for themselves that can really shape their actions and their attitudes and their way of being in the world.

[00:13:26.74] TORAL PATEL: That is really great. I really love the concept of kind of coming up with your own personal statement and so just if for some general advice like for somebody like me, I don't have one, right? But it would be kind of cool to create one for myself. If you just have some general advice about how might people go forward in creating their own personal statement, just briefly.

[00:13:46.78] OLIVER GOODRICH: Oh, it's such a big question. I mean we could spend like--

[00:13:49.44] TORAL PATEL: It is. It is.

[00:13:51.22] OLIVER GOODRICH: The million dollar question--

[00:13:52.42] TORAL PATEL: Yes--

[00:13:52.78] OLIVER GOODRICH: --literally.

[00:13:53.47] TORAL PATEL: That's why I said briefly. I know that's going to be hard to condense that down. But if I wanted to work on it, how could I-- maybe just say, how could I start?

[00:14:01.01] ANTHONY SIS: Well, and if I could just add to this too. So you know, I've worked with students before in different universities. And now in this capacity, working with staff. What I found with students, and I think similarly what resonates with a lot of staff members is that religion is a core part of their identity.

[00:14:17.02] And I think what I found with students is that for students in particular in certain university settings, there weren't a lot of spaces to talk about the intersection of say other diverse identities as well as religion. So I think, because of our audience and thinking about staff members, what type of advice-- going back to Toral's question-- like, how would you approach it for staff members who similarly have religion as a core part of their identity, but feel like there aren't a lot of spaces to talk about that intersection with other identities?

[00:14:46.40] OLIVER GOODRICH: That's such a good question. And I'll try to answer it as briefly as I can. But I do hope we can come back to the intersection of religion and other identities, Anthony, because it's such a key thing. And there's so much there to unpack.

[00:14:59.29] But, so the quick answer in terms of spirituality and mission, or like a personal mission statement, as Toral asked about-- so much of the work that I do in spirituality is about trying to find a common understanding of spirituality and really getting down to an understanding of this that everybody can access. And one of the access points to spirituality that I have found is around the idea of values. All of us have values.

[00:15:24.22] Sometimes this gets co-opted in political conversations to mean a particular thing. But values is sort of just a neutral term. All of us have things that are core to how we see ourselves and the core to the way that we interact with others in the world.

[00:15:36.59] And so I think a really helpful exercise for anyone who wants to understand their personal sense of mission would just be to sit with, what are some of-- this question of, what are some of your core values? I do an exercise with students. I've done this with staff some times, where I give a list of like 50, or sometimes 100, depending upon how much time we have-- different values that people commonly hold and ask them to start you know-- can you narrow that list of 100 values down to 30 that are really interesting to you?

[00:16:05.00] And then after we take 10, 15 minutes for that, we cut that list in half again down to 15. And then we go through another round, and we cut it down to seven. And then maybe if you're really feeling lucky, can you narrow it down to three core values that you just can't imagine your life not being about.

[00:16:20.18] And I think if anybody is willing to go through a process like that to really boil down to the absolute essence of what their core values are, as hard as that exercise is, it's really clarifying to bring to the surface what is most core to who you are and how you operate in daily life. So an activity like that could be helpful to you, Toral, or to anyone who wants to understand a little bit better what their mission or purpose is in life.

[00:16:44.27] TORAL PATEL: That's definitely great, because I've done those kind of activities before and they have been very helpful, like really eye opening. Because as you keep narrowing down, you were like, oh, well, I didn't realize this was going to come right to the top, right, and as you go through that process.

[00:16:57.71] OLIVER GOODRICH: And even for folks who've done it before, I think it's helpful to do again and do every so often to revisit this. Our values sometimes change over time, right? In the same way that some of our identities can change over time, so can our values.

[00:17:09.50] Personal anecdote briefly-- I would have always said that social justice or racial justice were among my core values. But I don't know if they would have made top five or top three. And maybe that in part is due to my white privilege in this space.

[00:17:23.72] But particularly over the course of the last six months as we've seen the racial awakening in this country in the wave of protests after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and others, racial justice has really risen to the surface to me. And I'm in a situation now-- a professional position-- where advocacy and education around these topics are such a core part of my work. It's really become a core value in a way that I don't know that it was prior to this moment. So just as one example of ways that

our values and our center of gravity sort of shifts on these topics over time. and it's a good exercise for us to continually engage in.

[00:17:58.73] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you so much for that advice. I really appreciate it. And I think our listeners will definitely appreciate it too.

[00:18:04.34] We've been seeing a lot of faith, spirituality, religion. And I've always struggled with how to use certain terms, or which term is more appropriate to use in certain spaces. So I recognize that there are three different terms. And I also recognize that well, there might be some overlap, but I also think there are significant differences in these terms. And so before we get any further on this topic, how do you view the distinction between these three terms?

[00:18:31.46] OLIVER GOODRICH: Super important topic, Anthony. I'm glad you brought it up. And I have noticed too, even in this conversation, we're using them sort of interchangeably. And I think many of us do that in everyday language.

[00:18:40.02] Religion as I understand it, and sort of is the easiest place to start-- religion is an institutionalized set of stories and values and actions and attitudes and rituals that have to do with a worldview in a way of seeing ultimate reality that a group of people hold in common together, right? So if we talk about specific religions, we can talk about Judaism and Islam and the Sikh tradition and Christianity, all of the major world religions that we think about.

[00:19:12.20] That is slightly different than faith. And I recognize as someone who identifies as a Christian-- that is a majority religion in the US context-- many of us have a sense of personal choice and agency around choosing religion. But that's not necessarily true for all people in all context. And so I think of faith as having sort of a personal connotation, and particularly a connotation of choice around it.

[00:19:36.32] Where I think a lot of folks, for example, some of our Jewish students-- their identity around Judaism is as much cultural as it is religious. There may or may not be a faith or spiritual component to their Jewish identity. I mean, that would be true of some of the other religions, as well. So I think it's helpful to sort of draw a distinction between religion and faith.

[00:19:57.26] And then, with the spirituality piece, it gets even more complicated. I sort of think of religion and spirituality as like if we were going to plot them on a Venn diagram as two different circles, religion and spirituality I think, have some overlap, right? Religion at its best, would foster a sense of spirituality for folks. But that's not true for all religions. And not everyone is drawn to religion for that purpose.

[00:20:23.61] So spirituality I think, is about getting in touch with one's spirit, about one's connection with oneself and others or a higher being for those who believe in a higher power. And even the way that we use spirituality I think, is a little bit ambiguous. Some people use the term spirituality.

[00:20:39.56] And I think what they mean is like that which is best in us or that which is good in us. And I love that definition. It's selfishly-- I love it, because it means that people want to engage in a conversation about something that I'm passionate about, right?

[00:20:51.65] But thinking a little bit about the last few months, I brought up some of the racial awakening that's been going on in for our country. It's hard not to see a spiritual component to racism and to some of the other social ills that we see in the world, right? We see income inequality. We see any number of social ills that we could talk about.

[00:21:11.97] And I believe at a core, those are spiritual problems that underlie those things. So somehow, we need to have a definition of spirituality that encompasses, not just what's best in us, but also, some of what's worst in human nature. So I try to use the term spirituality in a neutral way.

[00:21:29.64] Spirituality is just the orientation of our spirit. Our spirit might be oriented in a really generous, open way that connects us with others. It might be oriented in a way that is sort of inward turning and greedy or things that we might associate with vices, to use that language. So spirituality is just sort of the orientation of our spirit.

[00:21:50.46] At its core, all of us have a spirit. We might have different beliefs about it. But spirit, in its Latin roots is about that which gives us life, right? [LATIN] in Latin means breath to breathe. And our spirit is what orients our life, our energy, our breath.

[00:22:07.02] And we think of all the cognates-- inspiration, respiration, exploration. All of these have to do with life and the breath and energy. And so those I find to be helpful synonyms when we're talking about spirituality.

[00:22:19.38] Because we come from so many different religious beliefs about what the spirit is, it's helpful just to have this ground-level base meaning that spirit is just our life. It's our energy. It's the thing that orients all of us.

[00:22:31.71] Hope that helps. I hope I haven't made it more confusing in offering so many definitions here.

[00:22:36.93] ANTHONY SIS: I wouldn't say confusing. I just think you've added such a rich multilayered perspective that I'm really sitting with, because I definitely resonate with the spirituality definition a lot. And I've really tried to stray away from faith and religion. And I think your definitions of faith and religion have also made me question why I've strayed away from religion and faith.

[00:22:59.22] And part of it is because of negative experiences that I've had with religion and with faith. And wanting to connect with faith, but also tying it to religion in terms of my upbringing, kind of how I was taught to think about religion and faith simultaneously. So I'm just sitting with a lot.

[00:23:16.95] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, and not to add more layers to the many that already exist. But can you talk a little bit about how meaning making falls into those three terms?

[00:23:26.31] OLIVER GOODRICH: I think religion at its best-- to come at it from this angle-- part of what religion does at its best is to help people make meaning of life's experiences, right? So I work with these amazing chaplains in Cornell United Religious Work, who are not Cornell employees. But they're affiliated with their different religious traditions who have really placed a high premium on supporting students spiritual well-being.

[00:23:47.91] And the various traditions that they represent have rituals and tools and religious services that I think help people make sense of things like love. A marriage ceremony, for example, is a way of helping people make meaning of the experience that people have of loving one another and wanting to commit their lives to each other. And loss, right? We're in a moment of profound death and loss right now. And one of the beautiful things that religion can do through funeral services or other rights or rituals around death is help people mark the loss of a person and try to grapple with what that means for them and what their life meant and how they'll move on from those experience.

[00:24:32.10] So I think religion at its best is about helping people make meaning of some of those big core experiences of what it means to be human. I don't know that that always happens. But I think ostensibly that is the hope that religion can offer those things. And certainly, that the part that I love about spirituality is it opens up this broad conversation around meaning making.

[00:24:54.13] There's some folks who are doing really interesting work in this area apart from religious spaces. There's a guy who has a book that I'm going to forget the specific title to, but his name is Casper ter Kuile. And he identifies as a secular humanist. And he's really looking at the role that ritual can play in the life of atheists or agnostic or nonbelievers and trying to cultivate a sense of like habit or ritual for people who don't have access to religious basis. So there's some really interesting work that's being done in this space right now.

[00:25:29.14] ANTHONY SIS: You bring up an interesting point that I hadn't really thought about prior to this conversation is what do people make meaning, how do people make meaning in a virtual environment? Is it a barrier? Or is it actually an opportunity to maybe reshift or rethink how we think about spirituality, religion, faith? What are kind of some of the things that you've noticed, particularly in regards to how people are engaging in these three in a virtual setting?

[00:25:54.78] OLIVER GOODRICH: If you had asked me in March or April, I think I would have given you a really different answer than I would give you right now. And in some ways, I think that our experience has taught us over the last few months that there are new possibilities in this virtual space all the way around, right?

[00:26:09.86] An individual-- work teams are figuring that out. I think, families are figuring that out. Friends are figuring it out. And religion and spirituality are also figuring this out.

[00:26:19.16] You know, I'll offer a personal example that-- at a previous institution, part of my role was to offer spiritual direction to students. I was working at a Catholic institution. And it was serving as a spiritual director to Christian students.

[00:26:31.23] And one of the transition pieces that I was kind of sad about in coming to Cornell was that I wasn't going to be able to offer that same kind of support to students, because we're a non-sectarian university and Cornell doesn't pay chaplains directly, right? That's not my role to do spiritual direction per se for students.

[00:26:48.08] But what I have found is that I actually have been able to do spiritual direction remotely, which is not something that I ever would have done prior to this. But all people who are serving as spiritual directors right now are doing direction remote, because it's not safe to be in the same physical space as someone, right? So I actually have been able to do a little side project-- be able to continue doing some spiritual direction work. And I think that's one example of the way a lot of our chaplains have been able to explore new possibilities in this space.

[00:27:18.20] I'm also calling to mind a dear friend of mine and colleague who identifies as a secular humanist, Chris Stedman is doing some really interesting work in this area. He has a new book that's coming out shortly called IRL, which, of course, we know stands for In Real Life. It's called IRL, Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives. And in this book, Chris is really exploring particularly this topic of what it means to have some self-reflection about the ways in which we use technology and social media and the various connection points we have online-- to look at them as ways in which we are trying to in fact, make meaning and form connections with folks.

[00:27:58.46] And he offers all kinds of different examples about how he's done that as a queer person, as a secular humanist. And I found it to be a really just challenging and thoughtful read to examine some of my own personal engagement with social media and ways in which how we engage with social media is actually-- it represents a way in which we're trying to make meaning of the world and ourselves and our relationships.

[00:28:20.78] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, that's something to me that's been fascinating. And I'll just share a quick story for myself. My mom was sick for a while. And so we were having a prayer done for her in India. And I was able to WhatsApp in to the prayer.

[00:28:34.85] So it was being done at a particular temple in India, because the temple is located there. But for some reason, like because of the technology that exists, we were able to follow along in real time on WhatsApp through video and what was happening. And we were able to do all of the actual components of the prayer here in the states. It's just fascinating how creative we've been able to become through technology.

[00:28:59.24] ANTHONY SIS: Toral, and just for our listeners too so that they're aware-- what religion do you subscribe to, are part of, just for context?

[00:29:07.49] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, so I do follow the Hindu religion. So it's Hinduism.

[00:29:12.15] ANTHONY SIS: Where in this conversation is there space for people who don't subscribe to a religion? Is there space for people to make meaning, even if they don't have a specific connection to spirituality or to religion or to faith?

[00:29:24.87] OLIVER GOODRICH: I very much think that there's space for all folks to be a part of this conversation. And the way that we approach the conversation might be different based on our background and our experience with a particular religious or ethical tradition or non-tradition. But I do think there's space to open this topic up to everyone.

[00:29:44.01] Chris Stedman, who I mentioned earlier is coming to mind. He and I first met back when I was in graduate school over a decade ago. And he was, at that time, writing a book called *Fatheist*, which was a little bit about his own journey into interfaith spaces as a person who identified as an atheist, right?

[00:30:01.38] Some people might think like, what business does an atheists have in an interfaith space? Don't you have to have faith to be in interfaith space? And Chris's real insight was that atheists still care about their values. They still care about working together for the common good.

[00:30:16.47] And you don't have to hold a religious identity or a set of beliefs to participate in, not just those conversations, but in action to make the world better, right? He has a funny line. He said something about like, you don't have to agree in the afterlife to work together for a better this life.

[00:30:31.59] And the term "fatheist" is in the same way that many queer folks have reclaimed a term that's meant as an insult to then become a positive identity marker, Chris reclaimed a term that's meant as an insult-- that people in some secular humanist circles will say like, oh, you're one of those atheists? You're like sympathetic toward the religious people. Oh, you're a "fatheist."

[00:30:54.27] So he took that term and reclaimed it as a positive identity marker to say, yeah, I do actually have faith in something. The thing that I have faith in is humanity and in our shared common life together. So I offer his story as one example. And I don't think Chris would mind me saying it since he's written a book about it and we've talked about it a lot.

[00:31:12.27] Here at Cornell, I think some of the most interesting conversations that I've been able to have in the short time that I've been here have been with students who don't subscribe to a particular religious tradition and that's not been part of their own

personal narrative. They deeply grapple with the same questions that I think all of us grapple with.

[00:31:30.30] How do we make meaning of suffering? How do we find a sense of purpose? What is my place in this larger thing? And I can't imagine not having non-religious people as a part of that conversation.

[00:31:46.27] I also am a person, of course-- this reveals some of my bias-- that I think the more voices we can bring to the table, the richer the conversation that we have. So I tend to want to be a person that facilitates the most amount of people that can be in a conversation as possible. But those are some of my initial thoughts about that. What do you think, Anthony? I'm curious what your thoughts are about this.

[00:32:05.70] ANTHONY SIS: I don't really have many thoughts. I do think from an inclusion perspective, and as somebody who outside of this professional capacity as a training specialist, I similarly feel that there is room for everybody and anybody in any particular topic. So for example, I remember speaking to a staff member once, encouraging them to listen to the episode we did on expecting a baby during a pandemic-- that we did a few months ago.

[00:32:28.77] And their response was, well, that doesn't relate to me because I'm not in a relationship. I'm not expecting. And I was like, but I think there's a lot of valuable information that you can get from that conversation just by listening to it. And the person did.

[00:32:39.93] And then they realized like, wow, I learned about how to be a better advocate and all this other stuff. And so I think similarly, with atheism or just with any identity, there is always room for people to engage in a dialogue and in a conversation. But a large part of it is really centered on, how do you include them, how do you intentionally include them, which is what inclusion is about.

[00:32:57.96] How do you intentionally invite people to be a part of the conversation, which then also ties to this notion of belonging and how do you encourage people of all perspectives to be heard, to be valued, and to be seen? Because nobody wants to engage in a difficult conversation or dialogue and not feel like they're being heard or acknowledged.

[00:33:16.23] So in general, that's my approach to the work that I do, to the trainings that I do in both the professional capacity, as well as in a personal capacity that there is space for everybody. And I think at the core of being human is that connectivity. And that's something that I've learned. In my personal life, I've learned that in a very interesting way that I'm a very extroverted person.

[00:33:39.70] But even for folks who are introverted, like, they still crave connectivity. They still crave connection with other people, whether that's virtual, whether that's in person. And this pandemic I think, has made it really challenging for people to connect,

because we've been so used to in-person connections. And now, we've had to translate those in the virtual space that for some people that transition and that translation has been really difficult.

[00:34:00.33] That doesn't answer your question. But I think that-- I think the part of your response that I really resonated with is that we have to invite people in, and especially with everything that's going on in the world. And it's calling for a greater I think, awareness and understanding of empathy at a global level that we haven't seen before. So that's my long-winded answer.

[00:34:22.49] TORAL PATEL: Thank you for sharing that, Anthony. That's very powerful. And I just want to emphasize what you and Oliver both pointed out. And it's an absolutely amazing message, and I just want to reiterate it because of that-- that though we're talking about spirituality, faith, and religion today, this concept of our values, things that we all have in common that allow us to kind of still connect with each other and actually build relationships with each other beyond things that we don't have in common-- so even though we have different religious beliefs or different faiths that we believe in-- I think that applies to other identities in our lives as well.

[00:34:56.26] So though we might have different political views, that doesn't mean that we can't find the common ground to actually connect with each other and build a relationship, even beyond the differences. And so I think that's an absolutely amazing message that a lot of people need to hear. And if those that have heard it, I want to reiterate it, because I thought both of you stated that. And I thought it was great.

[00:35:15.93] OLIVER GOODRICH: I appreciate this conversation that we're having so much for so many different levels. And I think one of the things that's coming up for me is that if we were going to talk just at the level of religion with our colleagues, we might not find that to be like a super productive thing, right?

[00:35:30.60] Like, what's the old line? You're never supposed to talk about religion or politics, right?

[00:35:34.07] TORAL PATEL: Yes, yes.

[00:35:34.64] OLIVER GOODRICH: And particularly--

[00:35:35.60] ANTHONY SIS: Which is actually the reason why, when I went to undergrad, I actually studied government, because I wanted to understand why people always said that. My dad, especially-- I mean, to this day, he still says that. You can't talk about religion and politics. And for me, even as a young child, I associated it to very much so.

[00:35:51.63] And so I went to college, studied it, and then went to my dad and said, hey, guess what? You can't talk about politics without talking about religion in some parts of history. So you know?

[00:36:02.12] TORAL PATEL: Yes.

[00:36:02.91] OLIVER GOODRICH: Preach. You're speaking my language. So it's hard to talk about religion. It's such a loaded thing. And it's I think, in some ways, it's so deeply personal to us that it's hard to talk about in social space.

[00:36:14.51] But, if we can open up this meaning making part of the conversation, I think that allows us to identify commonly held values and shared values that allow us to connect with humans across difference. Like, Toral, you were sharing the story earlier about your family in India saying these Hindu prayers for a loved one who's suffering right now.

[00:36:40.07] Some Christians-- I identify as a Christian-- some Christians might hear that and say, well, I don't believe blah, blah, blah, blah, right? And they would have theological religious answer as to why that belief is different than their own. But at a human level, I hear you share that story, and what I hear is wow, how amazing that we're in this moment that they're able to rally their family and connect across thousands of miles and create a space where they can celebrate and care for and say words of healing for this person that they care about so deeply?

[00:37:12.62] And that's-- I have a different way to do that as a Christian. But I actually have the same values, right? And I think those transcend some of our religious differences.

[00:37:20.41] So if there's a way that we can approach the conversation at this profoundly human level, which I would add-- I think a space like Cornell allows us to do in a way that some of our religious traditions don't necessarily do, right? I identify as a queer person. And that's a really hard thing to talk about sometimes in Christian spaces, or in many religious spaces.

[00:37:40.88] But in a higher education setting, I'm encouraged to bring my full self to the table, especially these invisible identities that I hold, right? Identifying as a gay person, identifying as a Christian-- people don't see those things about me unless I choose to disclose them. And there's a level of safety I think in a higher education space that doesn't feel quite so religiously or politically loaded as other spaces and allows for just a different kind of sharing, and I think, back to your point, Anthony, a different level of just human connection, one person to another.

[00:38:13.58] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I share this-- not many people know, but as I just shared that I practice the Hindu faith. And yet, my kids actually go to Catholic school.

[00:38:21.08] OLIVER GOODRICH: I love it.

[00:38:21.50] TORAL PATEL: And we talk-- yeah. So we talk-- and Anthony and I've talked about this a lot and just the things that my kids learned versus things that I teach them about Hinduism and how there are so many different similarities. And people ask

me all the time like, doesn't that confuse your kids in terms of them learning about two different religions?

[00:38:37.64] And I say, at the end of the day, my kids learn how to be good people. And to me, that transcends any religion, right? So it would be the same things that they would learn in Hinduism and the same thing that they're learning in the Catholic school is just ultimately, they're learning how to be good people.

[00:38:54.21] There's lots of conversations that I have with my kids around religion and faith and spirituality, just because of what they're learning. Constantly, they're surrounded at least by two religions on a daily basis. I'll say it's an interesting household in my house. But we have some great conversations.

[00:39:11.59] And what's amazing to me is that my kids, who pretty much have grown up in both faith, because of their school and because of their home life, they can go back and forth between the two religions. And I think one of the stories I've shared before is so my in-laws went to India. And we have a Hindu temple in each of our houses.

[00:39:31.12] And so they bought a beautifully like, hand-carved wooden temple. And when it came, it came in pieces. And we were putting it together in the house. And my daughter was like, what are we doing? What's going on here?

[00:39:41.62] And my son is trying to explain to her what they're building. And she didn't get it. And he says, Aria-- you know, so my daughter's name is Aria-- he say, Aria, it's a manger. Like, what don't you understand about this?

[00:39:52.93] And he somehow connected the temple to Catholicism. And she immediately was like, oh, OK, I get it now. Like, it made sense to her. And so with the kids, it's so funny just that they're not phased by like a boundary. For them, these boundaries just don't exist about what they should believe and what they shouldn't.

[00:40:10.13] And so it's like I said, it's a fascinating time in my household. And we have some great conversations.

[00:40:15.40] OLIVER GOODRICH: It's beautiful. What it calls to mind to me, if I can just quickly jump in and say this-- so it makes me think of the words of Eboo Patel, who's the founder and leader of Interfaith Youth Core, this national leader that does interfaith work on college campuses around the country. And he says that people tend to call America a melting pot. And he thinks about religion particularly in some of the ways that there's like malleability and ambiguity among traditions here in the US.

[00:40:41.71] And he says, if you think about a melting pot, you wouldn't want a meal that is like some curry thrown in and some meatballs and then a piece of pizza and maybe a good Tex-Mex chili. Like, if you put that all in a pot and melted it together, it would just taste kind of weird.

[00:41:00.46] So he offers a different analogy, and he says that religion in America is sort of like a potluck or a buffet. Like, how beautiful if we can all bring our dish to the table, and we can have a buffet where we can go and have a delicious curry dish and some sushi and amazing arepas and different foods from different cultures, metaphorically speaking, right, that there's a way in which we can appreciate the particularities that each religion brings to the table. And we're in this amazing cultural context where all of those things can coexist alongside one another. Your story, Toral, really lifted that up for me.

[00:41:38.56] ANTHONY SIS: Oliver, thank you so much for joining us for part one of this conversation. As we wrap up-- because we already have time. Time really flies by when we have great conversations-- like, what's a takeaway? What is like a final message you want people to take away from all of the different things that we've talked about, but particularly I think going back to this notion of understanding the differences and the similarities between spirituality, faith, religion? What would be like a message that you would want to deliver to our listeners?

[00:42:08.47] OLIVER GOODRICH: One of the things that's sitting with me is the conversation we had just a couple of moments ago, Anthony, that I think many people have a fear of bringing their full selves to the workplace. And you know, particularly thinking about the Cornell work environment, people may legitimately wonder, does my religion have any place here, does spirituality even affect what I do 9:00 to 5:00 or whatever hours I happen to work? And I think there's a level at which, when we get down to it, our spirituality is really core to what makes us human.

[00:42:38.98] And all of us have a human desire to connect with other humans. I think that is sort of core to who we are. And I want to believe that when we can share those things that make us most human with one another that it actually allows us to connect. And I love the idea of thinking through, if we were able to create a workplace where people felt safe to bring their whole self, their visible identities and their invisible identities and safely share those things with one another, that it actually would like fuel our connection and our desire to be more productive and closer working relationships with one another.

[00:43:11.29] I really think it could be a beautiful thing to have a workplace that would allow those kinds of connections to happen. And just it would be a beautiful thing to see that take shape. So I would just encourage people to feel like they can bring their whole selves to the work environment and to their time at Cornell and that spirituality has a place in that.

[00:43:29.23] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you, Oliver, once again for such a wonderful conversation. And stay tuned for part two of this episode, coming out in just a couple of weeks.

[00:43:39.99] TORAL PATEL: If you like what you've heard, be sure to subscribe and submit a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or SoundCloud. It helps new listeners find

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us and the show. Also, if you or a fellow colleague would like to be interviewed for an upcoming episode, please email us at ie/academy@cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:43:59.79] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:44:05.58] TORAL PATEL: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Workforce Diversity in collaboration with Cornell Broadcast Studio.

[00:44:20.17] ANTHONY SIS: We would like to give a special shout out and thank you to our co-producer and sound engineer Bert Odom-Reed for making us sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:44:30.17] ALL: Thanks, Bert.

[00:44:31.33] OLIVER GOODRICH: Truly, thanks, Bert.