

Chapter 8

Public Relations and Religious Diversity: Toward the Common Good

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ABSTRACT

Modern nation-states have become culturally diverse owing in part to changes in immigration law, globalization, and increased ease of transportation presenting both opportunities and challenges, particularly where religious diversity is concerned. The author proposes a conceptual framework that embraces an interpretation of public relations as a social function (Tilson, 2009a), a covenantal model as a theoretical ground (Koehn, 1994; cited in Baker, 2002), and expanded communicative conceptual parameters that include religion in definitions of diversity. Using telephone and e-mail interviews and textual analysis of media to obtain data on religious diversity and public relations practices in the U.S., a review of initiatives suggests that communicators are fostering tolerance and resolving religious conflict through dialogue in keeping with conceptual models that emphasize the social responsibility of the profession. The study also underscores that socially responsible behavior often has a foundation of faith and that the intersection of faith and institutional practice merits a closer look.

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INTRODUCTION

Civil unrest, media news reports and social commentary suggest that the new millennium is an age of mistrust, misunderstanding, and conflict among people of different faiths. Some, including author and biologist Richard Dawkins, have suggested that religion itself is to blame as it has a harmful influence on society. World news coverage of atrocities committed in the name of one particular religion or another certainly would argue that point. And, yet, other evidence, for example, a 2007 study by social scientist Patrick Fagan released by the Heritage Foundation that found religious belief and practice does help address many of society's most serious social problems in a positive way, contends just the opposite. Indeed, for many faith traditions, charity is an important obligation, and faith communities often help those in need through various social service projects – homeless shelters, AIDs clinics, etc. And, perhaps more encouraging, such community relations efforts often are interfaith in nature with people of different faiths – prompted toward acts of social responsibility by their religion – working together in a spirit of fellowship. Moreover, as personal experience often illustrates, people of goodwill do foster tolerance and respect through interfaith dialogue and other initiatives in societies throughout the world.

An anecdotal review of such initiatives, particularly in the U.S. suggests that public relations professionals and other communicators are playing a role as change agents (Finnegan et al., 1990; Fischhoff, 1989; cited in McElreath, 1997) in fostering interfaith *communitas* or fellowship and in resolving religious conflict. Such efforts illustrate the nobler aspects of public relations when practiced with concern for the common good

and in keeping with conceptual models that emphasize the social responsibility of the profession. These interpretations of public relations offer an alternative to traditional views as well as emergent ones and argue the centrality of the public interest not only to institutional behavior in general but to public relations practice in particular. An examination of community initiatives also underscores that socially-responsible behavior often has a foundation of faith upon which to stand, and argues that the intersection of faith and institutional practice merits a closer look.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a combination of qualitative methods to obtain data on religious diversity, place-of-worship activities, and public relations practices. Telephone and e-mail interviews of key figures were conducted to gather data and probe the development of public relations strategies and effects. A textual analysis of institutional media, including electronic material, provided additional information on such aspects. Media coverage and field observations of selected religious sites provided further data.

A Theoretical Approach

One of the struggles the profession has had since its inception has been to formulate a view of itself that could be universally accepted. Hutton (1999) reviewed the history of U.S. public relations and identified some 472 different definitions – add to that the many definitions of professionals from other countries – and the Public Relations Society of America (2003) in its *Accreditation Study Course* offers three pages' worth of definitions

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