

## ‘WHERE WE ARE COMING FROM’:

A JOURNEY OF FAITH WITH THE NEW INTERFAITH COUNCIL

By Sarah Odell '06

Last fall, Ms. Hamilton, chair of the religion department and an ordained minister, invited me to join a new Interfaith Council she was starting. I jumped at the opportunity to take part in a movement that would give students the opportunity to talk about their faith in a pluralistic manner. Together with Ms. Hamilton, the eight of us have been pursuing our faith journey for five months now, meeting as a group on Sunday evenings to talk and bringing a series of speakers to campus. Sometimes I find it peculiar that I am helping spearhead this effort, because my own journey has been a roundabout one.

I grew up outside of Philadelphia and attended a small private school in Bryn Mawr. The school was nonsecular, but the students were predominantly Jewish or Christian. I personally am the product of a mixed marriage: my father is Jewish and my mother is Protestant. I did not attend Sunday school and while I did attend Hebrew school for a brief stint, I ended up leaving after an evening class a few weeks before Christmas, which can be a very stressful time for 13-year-olds in the Jewish community. The seventh-grade class, which was being taught by the rabbi, began discussing how Jesus was a Jew, but this quickly degenerated into a series of hoots and hollers from the students, with comments like, “Right on, Rabbi, those Christians really have something to thank us for!” Then the conversation switched to Kwanzaa, which the rabbi dismissed as a “made-up holiday.”

Religion has always been a source of inner conflict for me. I have never been willing to give up half of myself and enter an environment where I am unsure whether it is safe to ask questions. Does God believe that one religion is better than the others? Can I believe in Jesus and his teachings and still be Jewish? Do I have to believe in every teaching, or can I pick what works for me? When I began to look at boarding schools, I decided not to apply to any that had religious requirements. I felt it had to be my choice to go to church or synagogue; the decision had to come from a place deep inside of me and not from a requirement.

But during my second year at the Academy, I realized that I missed the sense of community which my Exeter friends who attended religious services seemed to experience. And so I began attending the Friday evening Shabbat services that the Exeter Jewish Community holds in the basement of Phillips Church. After lighting the Shabbat candles, I sat down to eat a home-cooked dinner with both Jewish and non-Jewish students. I felt at home because of the intimate surroundings, but most of all I felt comfortable because students openly discussed their confusions, dis-

agreements and successes with Judaism.

On the first Sunday the Interfaith Council met, Ms. Hamilton asked us to describe “where we are coming from.” I was astonished to find that the students sitting around the table with me—including a Catholic, a Southern Baptist, a Muslim, an agnostic, a Jew, a Hindu, people whom I considered to be some of the most religious

on campus—were coming from places similar to me. The devout Baptist spoke of “feeling the presence of God” during Muslim and Hindu prayers. Several members spoke of times when they had turned their backs on religion, including Ms. Hamilton herself, who described how she had found herself at odds with the Catholic church.

The Interfaith Council wants to begin a dialogue, similar to the one we held at that first meeting, with the entire campus. We want to give students a place where they can find out about other religions, express their faith, and ask questions in a safe but formal environment. We are going beyond the academic approach we take to religion

at the Harkness table. To begin this process, we have, in conjunction with the Assemblies program, the Day Fund and the religion department, brought a series of religious speakers to campus. Karen Armstrong, the world’s leading interfaith theologian, spoke at Exeter in early November on why interfaith dialogue is so important and about the nature of religious fanaticism in the three major world religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. We also hosted an evening forum later that month with Rabbi Everett Gendler, the former Jewish chaplain at Phillips Academy, and Dr. Ingrid Mattson, the vice president of the North American Islamic Association, who spoke about the commonalities of their religions.

The dialogue we are beginning is crucial. As Karen Armstrong told the Exeter community, tolerance alone is no longer adequate. We need, she said, to understand where each person is coming from. As one of the heads of the Exeter Jewish Community, I am seen as a leader of faith around campus. But I was not always comfortable with religion, and letting people know that I continue to have questions lets them see that religion is more than just a set of rules; it is a journey. A lot of us thought that to ask questions removed us from religion; but it was through our questions that we came back to our religion.

The council’s goals are to educate students about religions they are less familiar with and let students share their journeys of faith. As citizens of the world, we all have stories. At the Interfaith Council we are trying to teach the Exeter campus to listen to these stories, because then and only then will we understand.



*As part of its efforts to increase interfaith dialogue on campus, the newly formed Interfaith Council has brought several speakers to campus, including esteemed theologian Karen Armstrong (right), the best-selling author of A History of God. The council was founded by Reverend Jamie Hamilton (left), chair of the religion department.*

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