

Religious Intolerance and Ignorance in the United States

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Introduction

Chana Schoenberg's "Getting to Know About You and Me" examines a common paradox in a religiously diverse society: people may live, study, and work beside members of many faiths while knowing very little about their beliefs and practices. Lack of knowledge becomes harmful when it is filled by stereotypes. A person's clothing, family size, nationality, name, diet, or dating choices may then be treated as proof of a fixed religious identity. Schoenberg's account of a summer program demonstrates that honest conversation can expose these assumptions and create more respectful relationships (Schoenberg, 2018).

The article is especially relevant to the United States, where constitutional principles protect religious exercise while the population includes Christians of many traditions, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, members of other faiths, and people with no religious affiliation. Diversity alone does not produce understanding. Schools and communities must develop religious literacy: the ability to recognize internal diversity, distinguish description from endorsement, and discuss belief without ridicule or coercion (U.S. Constitution, amend. I; UNESCO, 1995).

Religious Ignorance and the Formation of Stereotypes

Ignorance is more than the absence of information. In social relationships, it creates a space in which inherited assumptions can operate without challenge. A student who has never learned about Mormon history, Muslim practice, or Egyptian Christianity may rely on entertainment, jokes, political rhetoric, or isolated experiences. The resulting image may feel factual because it has never been examined (Schoenberg, 2018).

Schoenberg describes students from Jewish, Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Methodist, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, and Lutheran backgrounds asking one another questions during informal meals. The importance of the scene is not that every participant became an expert. It is that direct conversation replaced imagined categories with actual people. Participants discovered both differences and similarities, and they learned that members of one tradition do not all behave in exactly the same way (Schoenberg, 2018).

The incident in which a student associates a large family with Mormon identity, followed by the response “No, I dress normal,” reveals two stereotypes at once. The first assumes that family size is sufficient to identify religion. The second assumes that members of that religion have an abnormal appearance. Neither speaker necessarily intends serious harm, yet the exchange shows how prejudice can be carried through ordinary language (Schoenberg, 2018).

Prejudice, Intolerance, and Discrimination

Prejudice is a judgment formed before adequate knowledge of an individual. Intolerance is unwillingness to respect the right of others to hold or practice beliefs different from one’s own. Discrimination occurs when those attitudes affect treatment, opportunity, or access. The concepts overlap but should not be treated as identical. A person may privately hold a stereotype, express it through ridicule, or translate it into an institutional decision (UNESCO, 1995).

Religious intolerance can appear in obvious acts such as vandalism, threats, exclusion, or denial of accommodation. It can also appear through repeated jokes, derogatory expressions, or assumptions that one faith is incompatible with national belonging. The professor’s use of an antisemitic expression in Schoenberg’s account demonstrates how discriminatory language may survive even in educated settings. Academic achievement does not automatically produce cultural sensitivity (Schoenberg, 2018).

UNESCO’s Declaration of Principles on Tolerance describes tolerance not as indifference but as respect, acceptance, and appreciation of human diversity. This definition is important because respectful coexistence does not require agreement with every doctrine. It requires recognition that people possess equal dignity and freedom of conscience (UNESCO, 1995).

An Egyptian Christian Experience

My experience as an Egyptian Christian illustrates how nationality and religion are often confused. Some classmates could not understand how a person from Egypt could be Christian. Their assumption reduced a country with a long and complex religious history to one identity. Christianity has existed in Egypt since the earliest centuries of the religion, and the Coptic tradition is an important part of Egyptian history. Yet students who lacked that knowledge treated my identity as a contradiction.

Questions are not automatically offensive. A sincere question can begin learning. The problem arises when the question contains a judgment or when the listener refuses the answer because it conflicts with a stereotype. Being repeatedly asked to justify one’s existence can also become exhausting. Minority students are classmates, not permanent representatives responsible for explaining an entire religion or nation (UNESCO, 1995).

My beliefs about dating produced another form of misunderstanding. Some students laughed because

I chose to wait until I was older. They interpreted a religious or family value as evidence that I was socially abnormal. This response shows how a dominant peer culture can become ethnocentric. Behavior common within one group is treated as the universal standard, while different choices are mocked rather than understood.

The experience affected relationships because I was not always judged by my personality. Classmates sometimes responded to the idea of an Egyptian Christian before they responded to me. Religious identity became a label through which ordinary decisions were interpreted. Such labeling can make a student feel visible as a category but invisible as a person.

Religious Diversity Within Traditions

Stereotypes depend on the assumption that every member of a religious group believes and behaves in the same way. In reality, traditions contain denominations, schools of interpretation, regional practices, and individual levels of observance. Two Christians may disagree about worship, politics, clothing, marriage, or scripture. The same diversity exists among Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other faiths (UNESCO, 1995).

Religious affiliation also intersects with race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, disability, and migration history. An Egyptian Christian, an African American Christian, and a Korean American Christian may share faith while having different cultural experiences. A Muslim woman who wears a headscarf and a Muslim woman who does not are not evidence for or against each other's authenticity. Understanding internal diversity is central to religious literacy.

People with no religious affiliation are also diverse. Some are atheists or agnostics; others consider themselves spiritual, retain selected practices, or have rejected institutions without rejecting every belief. Treating "religious" and "nonreligious" people as two uniform camps reproduces the same problem the article criticizes (Pew Research Center, 2025).

The Role of Schools

Schools are important because students encounter difference while their social identities are still developing. Education about religion is sometimes avoided because teachers fear that discussion will become devotional or controversial. However, silence does not create neutrality. It allows students to obtain information from unreliable sources and can leave minority students exposed to stereotypes.

Public schools may teach about religion academically without promoting religious practice. A responsible curriculum can examine history, literature, art, law, and social life while distinguishing education from worship. Teachers should present multiple traditions accurately, acknowledge internal diversity, and avoid asking one student to speak for a whole community (U.S. Constitution, amend. I).

Classroom discussion requires clear norms. Students should be allowed to describe beliefs and disagreements, but personal attacks and dehumanizing claims should not be treated as ordinary debate. Teachers need preparation to respond when a joke, stereotype, or political statement targets a religious group. Ignoring the comment may communicate that the harm is acceptable (UNESCO, 1995).

Accommodation also matters. School calendars, food, clothing, prayer, and participation in particular activities can create conflicts. Not every request can be granted in every setting, but institutions should use fair procedures and communicate respectfully. Students should not have to hide identity to obtain equal educational opportunity (U.S. Constitution, amend. I).

Freedom of Religion and the Boundaries of Tolerance

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects free exercise of religion and prohibits governmental establishment of religion. These principles require public institutions to avoid imposing a faith while protecting lawful religious expression. Neutrality does not mean hostility toward religion, and protection of faith does not authorize coercion (U.S. Constitution, amend. I).

Tolerance also has limits. Respecting a person's right to believe does not require acceptance of conduct that harms others or denies their legal rights. Likewise, criticism of a doctrine is not automatically religious hatred. The distinction depends on whether an argument addresses ideas and policies or treats people as inferior because of identity (UNESCO, 1995).

This distinction is difficult but necessary in pluralistic society. People must be free to debate theology, ethics, and public policy. At the same time, they should avoid language that converts disagreement into collective blame. A democracy becomes stronger when citizens can disagree deeply without questioning one another's humanity or citizenship (UNESCO, 1995; U.S. Constitution, amend. I).

Friendship and Intergroup Contact

Schoenberg's summer seminar suggests that personal contact can challenge prejudice. The students learned because they spent time together, asked questions, and participated in a shared program. Contact is especially productive when people meet with relatively equal status, cooperate toward common goals, and have institutional support (Schoenberg, 2018).

Friendship does not erase differences. Instead, it makes difference less abstract. A classmate who previously knew only a stereotype begins to associate a religious group with a person's humor, abilities, frustrations, and kindness. This can weaken the assumption that identity determines character (Schoenberg, 2018).

My own friendships with people from backgrounds different from mine support this point. We do not need identical beliefs to study, talk, and enjoy time together. Respect grows when no one treats the relationship as a project of conversion or demands that the other person conceal important values.

Media, Politics, and Public Perception

Religious stereotypes are reinforced when media repeatedly connect a group with one topic. Muslims may appear mainly in stories about terrorism, Jews in discussions of money or political influence, evangelicals in partisan conflict, and atheists as morally indifferent. Even when individual reports are factually connected to a subject, repeated narrow representation can distort public understanding.

Political rhetoric may intensify this problem by presenting religious minorities as threats or by claiming that only one tradition represents authentic American identity. Survey research continues to find that Americans perceive substantial discrimination against several religious groups. These perceptions vary by political and religious background, showing that intolerance is interpreted through broader social conflict (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Responsible media literacy asks who is speaking, which voices are absent, whether a group is internally diverse, and whether an isolated event is being generalized. Schools can teach these questions without instructing students what to believe religiously.

From Awareness to Practical Inclusion

Improvement begins with accurate language. People should avoid slurs, stereotypes, and casual expressions built on religious contempt. When a mistake occurs, correction should focus on impact and learning rather than public humiliation. An apology is meaningful when it is followed by changed behavior (UNESCO, 1995).

Institutions should establish anti-discrimination policies, provide complaint routes, and train staff to recognize religious harassment. Calendars and scheduling practices can be reviewed for unnecessary barriers. Libraries and curricula should include credible materials representing multiple viewpoints, including voices from within traditions.

Individuals can ask respectful questions while accepting that no one is obligated to disclose personal beliefs. Questions such as “Is there anything I should know to make this event accessible?” are more constructive than assuming a person follows a practice. Listening is as important as speaking.

Conclusion

“Getting to Know About You and Me” shows that religious intolerance often begins in ordinary

ignorance. Stereotypes about clothing, family size, nationality, dating, or morality become substitutes for knowledge, and those assumptions influence friendship, education, and belonging. My experience as an Egyptian Christian confirms that people can be judged through categories they do not understand (Schoenberg, 2018).

Diversity becomes a social strength only when it is accompanied by religious literacy, constitutional fairness, and respectful contact. Schools should teach about religion without promoting it, institutions should protect lawful expression without coercion, and individuals should evaluate people by their conduct rather than inherited stereotypes. Learning about one another does not require abandoning conviction. It requires enough humility to recognize that no label contains the whole person (UNESCO, 1995; U.S. Constitution, amend. I).

Works Cited

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