

Respecting Religious Traditions in Recreational Programming  
Through an Understanding the American Religious Community of  
the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Each year park and recreation professionals are confronted by requests and concerns voiced by citizens that require decisions involving an interpretation of the First Amendment. Nativity scenes in public parks, building use requests by religious groups, Sunday starting times for recreational sports and many other issues challenge our legal acumen and public relations skills.

What is commonly referred to as 'separation of church and state' is in actuality a well-crafted yet deliberately vague amendment to the Constitution that allows for the free exercise of religious belief, while at the same time forbidding the establishment of a religious system by our government. Laws, as opposed to rules, are designed to allow for interpretation and often reflect the changing mores of the nation. Decisions are rendered based on these interpretations combined with case law, which takes into account past judicial rulings that shape and guide legal actions.

Decisions of this nature are difficult for administrators and are often emotionally charged for the citizens involved. A broad understanding of the current status of the law, the historical context of the past rulings and a bit of theology are called for. This article offers the reader an overview of these concepts and a few examples that may help to initiate a fuller appreciation of this issue.

### **The Role of Immigration in the Conscience of the United States**

The American experience over the past two centuries was one of constant immigration. The first permanent European settlers in American history came from England and the Netherlands. They were motivated by economic, religious and political opportunities that the New World offered. During the first fifty years after independence, the United States received about 710,000 immigrants--which is about how many were admitted in 1995 alone. 1. During the first century or so of our country's existence, (1776 to 1884), the U.S received about two immigrants an hour; in the 1990s, we are admitting more than two immigrants a minute.<sup>2</sup>

Immigration reached its peak between the years 1892-1924. Each wave of humanity that landed on the shores of the United States brought unique cultural practices, a desire for success, and a commitment to make a better life for themselves and their families. During this period the vast majority of settlers were of western European origin. The predominant religion of these settlers was a form of Christianity. The demographics of the US during its formative years was that of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Since 1970, the foreign-born population of the United States has increased rapidly due to large-scale immigration, primarily from Latin America and Asia. The foreign-born population rose from 9.6 million in 1970 to 19.8 million in 1990. The estimated foreign-born population in 1997 was 25.8 million. As a percentage of the total population, the foreign-born population increased from 4.7 percent in 1970 to 7.9 percent in 1990, and to an estimated 9.7 percent in 1997.<sup>3</sup>

The United States accepts more immigrants than any other country. The revised immigration law of 1990 created a flexible cap of 675,000 immigrants each year, with

certain categories of people exempted from the limit. This law attempts to attract more skilled workers and professionals to the United States and to draw immigrants from countries that have supplied relatively few Americans in recent years. The 1990 Immigration Act increased legal immigration by forty percent. The level of *legal* immigration has doubled in the last twenty years.<sup>4</sup>

During this period the proportion of the total population that can be classified as Christian has declined from eighty-six percent in 1990 to seventy-seven percent in 2001. Over 37 million residents describe themselves as belonging to a religion other than Christianity (7,740,000) or having no religious affiliation (29,481,000)<sup>5</sup>

From the onset of our democracy, differences existed between the various immigrant groups. These groups worked hard to earn mainstream acceptance but were not always appreciated or understood. The motto of E Pluribus Unum, Out of Many One, guided the political and social actions of the nation. Ethnic groups, however, tended to live in select urban areas and their lives centered on shared experiences of homeland, faith and their newly developing lives in the United States. Social life often revolved around affiliation with a particular church that served the needs of their community. The church became the community center and primary means of social affiliation for first and second generation Americans. Intermarriage between members of different faiths and different ethnic groups did not become commonplace until after World War II. Remnants of this lifestyle are evident in most major cities where ethnic neighborhoods have survived despite the misguided efforts at urban renewal that prevailed in the 1960's and 70's.

School children of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were taught that the US represented a melting pot. The 'ingredients', until recently, were predominantly white western European immigrants who gradually minimized or discarded those characteristics that differentiated them from the majority of American citizens. Despite the image of people huddled together in a big black pot, simmering over a fire, most children and their families accepted this fairly idealized image of American life as a melting pot.

During the past forty years, the melting pot has disappeared from the conscience of American society, paralleling a demographic change in the immigrant community. The newly arrived are now predominantly South and Central American, Asian, and from the Pacific basin. These new immigrants represent a challenge to the traditional path of acculturation due to very distinct cultural differences, including non-Christian belief systems. The melting pot notion of assimilation and acculturation has been replaced by images such as a salad bowl, a patchwork quilt, or a mosaic which connects various traditions. Increasingly, each new group maintains its particular identity while becoming an integral piece of a greater whole.

It has been noted that the presence of large numbers of culturally diverse individuals in a compact well-defined location within a community may actually change the pre-existing culture in a form of reverse assimilation. William Branigin, in the Washington Post, notes that many Central and South American immigrants do not readily

accept the cultural standards of American society, as they include norms and behaviors that are perceived to be counterproductive and a threat to traditional, conservative views of family and morality.<sup>6</sup>

Assimilation into American culture has negative aspects as studies show that the newest Hispanic immigrants in Omaha, Nebraska who maintain their traditional values are more successful in school than those that have assimilated both the good and the bad elements of American culture.<sup>7</sup>

The hallmark of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for American society is that change will be constant and diversity must be understood and embraced. Academics, over the past fifteen years have identified critical elements pertaining to diversity and have sought to measure and understand the impact of 'difference' on the field of recreational service. Further study has sought to identify those factors that are perceived to be constraints to full enjoyment of leisure.

Constraint research, as defined by Jackson (1997), offers a succinct understanding of the concept as "factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived or experienced by individuals to limit the formation of leisure preferences and to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure".<sup>8</sup> Godbey (1997), includes interpersonal barriers such as religiosity... prior socialization into specific leisure activities... and subjective evaluations of the appropriateness and availability of various leisure activities as constraints." as possible constraints on leisure preference and use.<sup>9</sup>

## **Religion and Recreational Activity**

Religion, understood as a system of shared beliefs regarding a spiritual or divine presence that is communally celebrated through worship and other practices, has only recently received attention from leisure and recreation scholars; Doohan, (1990); Emard, (1990); Ibrahim, (1991); Ryken, (1991,1995) Prebish, (1993); Daniels (1993, 1995); Heintzman, Van Anandel, Visker, Eds.,(1994); Heintzman, Van Anandel, Visker, Eds., (1994); Lamm, (1996); El-Sayed,(1997); Shiver & deLisle (1997); Overman, (1997); Muller, (1999); and deLisle, (2002, 2003)

Likewise, recreation practitioners have struggled with the needs of religious communities as their cultural expression and preferred recreational pursuits are frequently tied to their religious beliefs.

### **Judaism**

Historically, religion has played a critical role in our understanding of leisure and our predisposition towards recreational activity. The role of the Sabbath in the Hebrew tradition set aside one day of the week for rest, celebration and worship. The prohibition of work (*melakhah*), as described by 39 specific activities that were forbidden by law on the Sabbath, was the basis of the covenantal relationship of the Hebrews with their God. The concept of rest (*menuhah*) was established in order to give glory to Yahweh. These

practices provided an environment of disengagement from the world, a period allowing for self-knowledge and self-transformation or re-creation. This idea is captured in the concept of *neshamah yeterah* – the experience of an additional or expanded soul during the Sabbath rest. This realization of self-improvement through study and contemplation is reminiscent of the Greek concept of *scholē*.

## **Christianity**

Christianity sought to redefine the Sabbath, diminishing the legal implications and increasing an understanding of the spirit of the Law. Jesus taught extensively on the Sabbath and often withdrew from the crowds in order to have rest. As the Christian tradition progressed, the Sabbath was officially declared to be a day without work and was set as Sunday by Constantine in the fourth century.

Other days were set aside to honor events in the Christian tradition and to memorialize exemplary members of the faith; martyrs and saints. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century certain areas of western Europe observed over 100 feast days wherein work was averted and various sorts of celebrations were observed.

The Protestant Reformation radically redefined the Sabbath, eliminated church holidays to the point that the observance of Christmas was briefly outlawed in Scotland in 1600's by the followers of John Knox. The English monarchy wrestled with the needs of its citizens as various groups, including the Anglicans and Puritans, held differing views on leisure and recreation. King James I issued a decree, *The Book of Sports*, in 1618 which identified 'lawful recreations' for the Sabbath. The introduction of protestant theology and practice as the dominant religious force in the colonies of North America initiated a long struggle with the acceptance of leisure and the identification of appropriate recreational activity.

## **Islam**

Islam, founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, shares historical and theological principles with Judaism and Christianity. Tradition holds that the Islamic faith is predicated upon the divine message recited by Mohammed through the inspiration of the archangel Gabriel. These recitations were later written as the book of the Qu'ran. Additional guidelines for Islamic living are found in Mohammed's *Kadith*.

Ibrahim (1991) tells us that true Muslims adhere to five articles of faith: belief in one God, belief in his angels, belief in his revered books, belief in his prophet Mohammed, and belief in the Day of Judgment. The principles that regulate the private lives of Muslims, the Five Pillars of Islam, consist of *Shahadah*, reciting the profession of faith; *Salat*, performing five daily prayers preceded by ablutions; *Zakat*, paying a tax for the needy, *Sawm*, fasting during Ramadan and *Haij*, conducting a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Islam does not accept a dual or secular view of government and society, but one based on the Qu'ran. Nor does Islam leave it to human beings to decide what is moral and immoral based on their whims, desires or man-made ideas. Human behavior is to be guided by the *Shari'a* (Arab., the path worn by the camels to the water) a systematic

organization of how Muslims should live. Various schools of interpretation exist allowing for diverse beliefs and practices.

Islam, according to Ibrahim (1991), has no equivalent word for leisure but does express the ideas of rest, play and recreation. Ibrahim (1988) identifies three sets of desires associated with leisure: a desire for amusement, relaxation and laughter; a desire for stimulation of all the senses, and a desire to wonder, learn and gain knowledge. Ibrahim identifies five distinct stages in the development of society. The third stage, one of tranquility, includes the prominence of leisure and the growth of crafts, fine arts and the sciences.

### **Relevance for Today's Professional – Cases to Consider**

The leisure problem of the 1970s, brought on by the possibility of a reduced workweek due to the technical advances of computers, indicated a discomfort and distrust of the prospect of additional leisure. Gordon Dahl (1974) aptly described our confused state regarding leisure and recreation in his statement that “Americans worship their work, work at their play and play at their worship.”<sup>10</sup> Religious organizations took it upon themselves to protect their members from the dangers of too much free time by training clergy in the administration of recreational activities (Ernce, 1987).

Our current understanding of the relationship between religion and recreation is heavily impacted by secularism. In the past ten years the number of individuals in the US who do not subscribe to any religious organization has doubled from 14.3 million to 29.4 million. An additional 11 million refused to identify a preferred religion. Further analysis suggests that membership in a particular religious group does not equate with active participation in that group.<sup>11</sup>

What can we expect from government, particularly in the provision of recreational services, with respect to religious beliefs and practices? The First Amendment to the Constitution provides guidance, but confounds legislators and recreational professionals as they attempt to address religious issues in their communities.

The American Atheist movement is a vocal critic of restrictions placed on organized recreational activities and professional sports on Sundays. Their premise is that these restrictions favor particular religious beliefs and practices to the detriment of other groups. As threatening as this may seem to some, their complaint is well founded. The group reports practices in Utah that forbid recreational activities on Sunday. Restrooms at parks have remained locked alienating groups such as Seventh Day Adventists who hold Saturday to be the traditional Sabbath.

The New York Times reported that residents of the village of Larchmont, New York petitioned the recreation department to not schedule recreational sports on Saturday or Sunday morning as Christian and Jewish residents are predominant in the community. The paper cited scheduling and budgetary restraints as making the request untenable.

The City of Holland, Michigan, historically a conservative community with close ties to the Reformed Christian tradition, has over the past fifteen years seen its

demographics change due to an large influx of Hispanics and a diminished allegiance to the norms of the local church. Recreational program schedules, once banned on Sundays and Wednesday evenings due to church responsibilities, now more accurately mirror the make up of the community.

Dearborn, Michigan presents a unique case as the city of 100,000 residents representing over eighty different nations includes over 30,000 citizens of Arab descent. With the opening of the Ford Community and Performing Arts Center which includes aquatic, sports and fitness, banquet facilities and state of the art performance space, the recreation staff has learned to adapt, adjust and welcome the diversity of its community. The center snack bar offers halal alternatives, food which adheres to Muslim dietary restrictions in addition to the standard fare. The banquet hall may be serving a traditional Muslim wedding party, while the performance space is hosting a Bar Mitzvah. Greater challenges were present as the clothing restrictions for women placed limitations on their enjoyment of the aquatic center and exercise classes. While women only exercise classes allow for traditional head covering, the Center was unable to accommodate exclusive female use of the pool, nor could they limit lifeguards to male only at the request of Arab men. Requests were also made for extended hours of operation during the holy month of Ramadan, but were not met due to budgetary and scheduling constraints. The Center does offer the alternative of renting the facility in order to meet specific community requests.

Recreation Director Greg Orner indicates that while the diversity of his community is challenging it is a source of pride for his staff as they work to serve this unique community. He cites participation rates for baseball remaining flat at about 700 youngsters, soccer has grown to over 1400 players in the past five years, in part due to the influx of soccer loving families.

## **Observations and Conclusions**

What are the common conceptions and misconceptions about our government that may confuse our expectations regarding the Exercise and Establishment Clauses of the First Amendment?

Despite reports of the decline in importance of organized religion in the US, the institutional church provides meaning, stability and moral guidance, and generally promotes peace and societal well-being. Furthermore, many religions provide a vision of a more perfect future whose realization is striven for during the present. These attributes can add much that is good to the quality of life of religious practitioners and their communities.

The challenge is one of exercising tolerance as a means of accepting, though not necessarily agreeing with the beliefs of another. Tolerance, described in this way by John Locke, Voltaire and others of the Enlightenment period inspired leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine to address the issue in popular literature and in the foundational documents of our democratic state. Voltaire argued that the process of

imposing homogeneous values led only to conflict and religious wars. The society that resulted from such a process was intellectually stagnant and morally corrupt, because no questions or dissent were permitted. Instead of homogeneity and control, it was diversity and freedom that created a thriving and peaceful society

We must understand that the original goals of our nation was not the realization of a Christian state that accepted other faiths as lesser yet tolerable practices. Many of the Founding Fathers practiced a philosophical belief called Deism which embraces the presence of God yet does not restrict God's existence to a particular faith. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, James Madison and Benjamin Franklin officially belonged to the Church of England, as it was required by law in order to participate in public service, yet held a more expansive theological perspective.

The inclusion of God in our pledge of allegiance and on our money does not say Jesus, Yahweh, Allah or another deity, it is God as each of us comes to understand this.

Embracing this basic idea of tolerance allows one to progress to supporting and promoting the idea of diversity. Diversity describes our ability to incorporate and celebrate differences of race and ethnicity, age, gender, ability, class and sexual orientation in a positive way as we create a 'more perfect union'. We must identify where we are as individuals, communities and society regarding our level of tolerance and our understanding of diversity.

Allison and Schneider have assembled a critical work addressing these issues in the text *Diversity and the Recreation Profession* wherein twenty five authors share their understanding of diversity as it relates to our profession. In the text, Bedini & Stone, making use of a model by Wheeler (1994), call for the profession to move from state of Unconscious Incompetence to Conscience Competence and to then become Consciously Competent resulting in a final state of Unconscious Competence whereby our ability to exercise tolerance and embrace difference becomes second nature. Incorporating diversity, according to Bedini & Stone, requires a conceptual framework that includes education, facilitation communication time, commitment and the ability to face challenges in a positive an open way. It is what Chavez in the same text identifies as a strategy of Invite, Include and Involve.<sup>12</sup>

Organized religions have the power to unite and promote what is best in humanity but have also, since the beginning of time, been the catalyst for untold suffering, radical fundamentalism and the unbalanced exercise of power. Recreational professionals, as they reach out to all segments of a community, have a unique and important role in supporting the positive and constructive role of religion in society; one of mutual respect, personal, communal and spiritual growth, and peace.

