

# {HOLDING SPACE}

## RELIGIOUS BIAS

### Transcript

#### Joan Collier

Welcome, and thank you for listening to Holding Space, a podcast where we make room for conversation about the nuance and complexity of all things equity, inclusion, diversity, access, and justice. I'm your host, Dr. Joan Collier, assistant vice president for equity and inclusion in University Equity and Inclusion here at Rutgers University. In this episode, we'll be revisiting a conversation on religious bias that was part of the Education as Disruption series from fall 2021. I was joined by Kerri Willson, associate dean and director of off-campus living and community partnerships and students affairs at Rutgers–New Brunswick; Rabbi Jason Cook, reformed rabbi and senior Jewish educator at Rutgers Hillel; and Atiya Aftab, Esq., adjunct professor and chair of the Center for Islamic Life at Rutgers University–New Brunswick. We learned more about specific forms of biases against religious groups and discussed ways for community members to continue their learning; to examine our own thoughts and potential biases; and to work toward greater inclusion. Let's join the conversation!

...And while there's plenty of community to be had, there's also undercurrents of bias and hatred that come up. So I'll ask the question as it's written: What are the biases – what are some of the biases toward people of various faith groups? It's important for me that folks have a working definition or at least a framework, right, for how folks can conceptualize what it is that we're talking about when we say bias attitudes, or hatred toward groups, so that they can name it, they can be aware of it, they can figure out how to disrupt it, and not

be like, I didn't know that that was a thing. They're things and we want to put those up front, we can work to disrupt those right through education, and then through some skilling that will help us to say, actually that's not cool to say that. What are some of those pieces? I'll go with Rabbi Cook first.

### **Rabbi Jason Cook**

Yeah, so I think that to name the main bias that we experience, we as Jewish community experience on campus is summed up in the word antisemitism, the idea that there's discrimination against Jews on the basis of their Judaism on the basis of who they are as people, who we are as people. But it's also to say, we, as a Jewish community, experienced multiple layers and levels of various bias not just about faith or religious tradition, you know, women in Judaism experience gender-based discrimination, the LGBTQ+ community, both internally and externally, can experience discrimination and bias. So we try actually, as a Jewish community to really open up our doors and thinking a lot about how we both as a community focusing internally, and can make sure to smooth out some of those biases and be honest with ourselves and do an accounting of what we would call, an accounting of the soul – and how to really be particular about the way that we are interacting with each other and building community to be as inclusive and diverse as possible. The other thing that I would like to say is that, especially as it relates to antisemitism, part of the goals of antisemitism and a major part, a feature of the bias is that it paints Judaism as a monolith, that all Jews are the same. All Jews experience Judaism in the same way and it strategies. Antisemitic strategies are built to do that, particularly because it helps marginalize the Jewish community more effectively. So when we can talk about diversity within our community, and build bridges across diverse communities, both internal to the Jewish community and external, we can actually start fighting against some of those biases that exist, not only towards Judaism, but also to the community in general.

### **Joan Collier**

Rabbi Cook you preachin' real good. Professor Aftab, Can you help us learn more?

## Atiya Aftab

So I mean, it's a parallel, I mean, the issues, you know, regarding Muslims, and bias is really what's called Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hate anti-Muslim rhetoric. Rhetoric, which essentially is fear of prejudice, or hatred of Muslims or those who appear to be Muslims, that could lead to hostility and tolerance, and of course, harassment, abuse, all the way to violence. And, you know, with that, you know, some things are, you know, we talked about implicit biases, like explicit bias and bias. In fact, the course that I teach at Rutgers was developed post 9/11, to really recognize that issues surrounding Muslims need to be dealt with in an academic environment, as well as many other environments and anti Muslim rhetoric. And our students, I would say, even from, you know, the first step of, you know, feeling like they don't belong on campus, that they are the other, they are the guest. They are the stranger on campus. And I, and I'm, you know, really heartened that Rutgers does, in its marketing material, and in various material always includes an obvious Muslim, people of different colors, names that are different. And I think that's a very first step in saying, Hey, you're welcome on this campus. But you know, there's, you know, so I would say, that's the first step. Obviously, women who wear a scarf these days, you know, and you can wear a scarf for many different religious traditions, but right now, it's, you know, basically, you're Muslim. And we, you know, our community has definitely been the victim of a lot of violence, and bias because of these obvious, you know, reflections of our faith, whether it's those – whether it's modesty and dress issues, whether it's, you know, issues regarding how Muslims eat differently, and we share this with the Jewish community, our holidays, which are different than – than, you know, the the majority of people who are following holidays, and that's the challenge with kids in the classroom, our students in the classroom who have a holiday, and our calendar is a lunar calendar. And so our holidays are not fixed. We can't say oh, you know, December 25 is Christmas. Now we don't – we don't have that. Our holiday or Ramadan, it rotates through the solar calendar. So you know, that's – that is an ongoing challenge. Even conversations in the classroom and being included in conversations in the classroom and not being treated like the other or the minority. So these are some of the issues that – that our community faces. And I like I said, I'm, you know, I'll put the shout in

for records, but I'm very proud of how our institution has been recognizing this and the work that we do on the Multifaith Council, as well as the Interfaith Alliance, which is a smaller group of full time Chaplaincy on campus.

### **Joan Collier**

Okay! Oh, so many good things, pieces for further learning that I'm pulling as I go. So my role as Director for Telecom at the Center for Diversity and Bias Prevention, thinking about, appreciating, and even understanding that the Christian normative light, the norming of broader society to Christian holidays, principles, ethics, all those sorts of pieces disadvantage, folks structurally, who are not Christian identified. Even if they are not Christian today culturally, Christians that grew up in that but no longer abide by the faith still understand that the broader culture isn't around – isn't centered on that. And so then if you are not Christian, this is where we have the impasse. And so Rutgers New Brunswick, as part of the Hillel Campus Climate Initiative and in one of our previous sessions, we learned about the timing of the calendars. And so how those shifts- so to have that understanding across multiple faith, traditions, is actually really helpful. And I think something that I would probably do more around teaching people so that they have an understanding of why times are shifting and how it's not as abnormal. It's just not Christian, right? And that's okay. That is all right. So many good things here to the – to Rabbi Cook disrupting biases within and thinking about the multiplicity of identities within I think, and talking with both you and Professor Aftab we've talked about the diversity within religious groups and thinking I am a Christian. Interesting, the title for me to have but I am thinking even the way this diverse within our own setting, and how the diversity of thought and experience and how we understand our text and our practices and our ethics around our faith. So the – the exploration of internal pieces, I think, is where a lot of richness and depth and fun happen. Fun for me, because I think learning is fun. Associate Dean Willson, I'm going to come to you about what the impacts of hatred and bias are on our students. And there are some faculty and staff who are part of various groups. But what does that actually look like? We're in a classroom, I can't be out for a holiday to be with family, someone has said something or

there are signs up about my faith or an assumption about my faith that's not hospitable and welcoming, and has linkages to past violence against my people. What's the impact of that on campus?

**Kerri Willson**

The challenge really is that a student then may not feel welcome and they don't feel like this is their campus community. Professor Aftab referenced this a bit, as did Rabbi Cook, you know, this is the reality of our students not feeling like they are welcome in, you know, our classrooms or into our residence halls, or our student centers, because they feel like they are the other, that they are being specifically targeted because of their faith because of how they practice whatever the case may be. But, you know, we've had students who, you know, have been afraid to get on a bus. We've had students whose parents have told them that they can't participate in a specific student organization that is, you know, related to their faith practice, because they're worried that they're going to be targeted, that they're going to be listed as a member of, you know, X community, and that's going to cause problems for you. So and it, you know, it's been happening for years. And I think you talked about the the Christian calendar that – that was a huge lesson for me to learn, and I'm so ingrained in it. The idea that I might not have off the week between Christmas and New Year's I'm like, wait, what, you know, but recognizing that – that it's sort of framed for me? Wow, like we really are built around this. This, you know, Christianity, and it's convenient for me, because I identify as Christian as well, but the challenges that our Jewish and Muslim and then Hindu students face when they you know, their religious holiday falls on a day when an exam is scheduled. And we do have a real religious observance policy so Faculty are supposed to make an accommodation, but it's not easy for students to get that accommodation made for them. And this is the way that bias presents itself. Because again, if you don't have that framework or that understanding of how our academic calendar is built around the convenience of my faith practice, even though we're a state school, you know, then it's a nuisance that I have to make an accommodation for a student because it's Diwali or it's, you know, Yom Kippur or something like that.

**Joan Collier**

So if I'm gonna hold exams late, and it's Ramadan, and students have not eaten. I'm always like it's the middle of summer, like it's summer, it's hot, days are long. Ramadan is not falling in the dark season when it's, you know, 10 hours a day.

**Kerri Willson**

Well, it is though.

**Joan Collier**

It is! It's longer, longer. Here I go being wrong and loud on a whole webcam.

**Kerri Willson**

This is the fascinating piece. And this is something that Professor Aftab and I have been working on. The Muslim community doesn't have the benefit of that extra month that the Jewish community throws into their calendar to sort of, you know, write those dates of their holidays. So every, every year, Ramadan is what about 10 days earlier. Yeah, so at this point, last year, we were during finals or – right, so we're during finals.

**Atiya Aftab**

And now we're going to be having the month of Ramadan from beginning of April to the beginning of May.

**Kerri Willson**

The busiest time on campus, whether it's, you know, academically, or even outside of the classroom experiences, April is busy, busy, busy. And so now we're trying to sort of work out and negotiate how can we carve out space and time for students to be able to come together and break the fast and, you know, do – do things to support their faith journey while also supporting their academic journey as well.

### **Joan Collier**

I'm listening, I'm writing that note down so I can be sure to share that in. I mean, truly to share that in so folks are thoughtful of that in course design, right? Because it's, I mean, of course, I- my experience is coming from when I was a hall director. Ramadan was falling during move in, my RA staff was much- like predominantly Muslim, I had a few Jewish students. But we're doing moving and the Sunday is long, like the sun is up at five, it's down at eight, my students are still actively doing their jobs. And then we still had night activities and trying to roll that around. So to hear it now shifting further back, what that looks like. So when I meant it's not happening in the dark season, I mean, it's happening when the day was longer. But in April classes are winding down, things are happening. And it's still – April is busy and higher it, so make a note of that.

### **Atiya Aftab**

You know, if I could Dutch color. I think, you know, holidays are obviously extremely important issues, but I have to highlight a challenge of the Muslim community in that we had FBI surveillance on our campus in Newark, Rutgers Newark. We are – there's a currently a case before the court. That's right. About infiltration into the Muslim community by the FBI, and that kind of surveillance. So, you know, I feel like the Muslim community right now this time and day that we're in right now, it's just a so many levels of concern, and so many level ways that they're very guarded. And that's a big challenge to carry. Dean Willson just touched on that the, you know, the idea of students not necessarily wanting to come to a Friday prayer, because maybe they don't feel like they want to be in a space that could be targeted. And I'm not saying that's everyone, I'm saying that – that just exists because of the times that we're living in. I'm sure, right, like Rabbi Cook, you can understand that as well, especially with what was going on in the previous presidency when we had so many synagogue and, you know, mosque shootings, and it's, it's frightening. So there's a level of security, and then it's almost like, okay, once we get through that now, let's talk about holidays. It's almost becomes like, you know, what, you know, it's really tough for our students. It's tough to be a minority. And it's also tough when you have, I think Rabbi Cook touched on, this

intersectionality so when you're a female Muslim, when you're an African American Muslim, and you know, there's just keep adding to it, you're an immigrant, you're whatever adds to the levels of challenge and you know, that's what we're faced. That's the reality on the ground.

### **Joan Collier**

Yeah, I don't paint good pieces. Um, the problem with a single story, the problem with the monolith, right, is that folks, so because what I can hear in my head is always a critique. I always had the critique in my head, right? Well, what is the actual problem that- what is the problem? And there are multiple problems. That's the problem. There's multiple problems. And what we're doing in this session is problematizing, some of the pieces so folks understand where some of the troubles are, so that we can think about how we advocate for our friends or our colleagues, our community members, right? So that we can be the folks who, when our colleague or I say, colleagues, and I'm a staff member, that's – that's my orientation, is that, you know, we can say, Oh, well, my colleague has spoken up about the challenges of the calendar. I want to amplify what they just said. We need to rethink that banquet. We need to rethink what the options are in the dining hall. My – my colleagues, my classmates, my roommate, my hall, Nate has said they have concerns about safety. I remember what happened after Dylann Roof shot up the AME Church in, in South Carolina, I remember how terrifying it was to have revival that week in the golden church, not just because I was Christian, because it wasn't about that, it was about race. But it meant to go sit in a church and be terrified that I might lose my life at church during prayer. And so the security pieces around it right? How do we advocate for folks who are concerned that they're under surveillance, when there's a history of it. So the monolith right, allows us to disregard the diversity within and there's a danger in that because then we don't understand the fullness of our own communities. And it limits our imagination around what allyship, and advocacy and learning can be. And it also does not allow us, I think, to find partnership with other folks who are similarly situated, giving us some of the context looks a little different. And so this is so delicious. This is so good. Delicious, means it is rich, and it's fun. And I want to have more like dessert. It's just really good. Not because biases is bad, but because I think



the learning that's happening is just really rich right now. And it's giving people things to pull -apart and sit with and even come back to later. We've talked about what these experiences might be. Yeah, I was given a really poignant examples of what some of the realities of bias hatred and stereotyping bar and implicit bias and even internal biases that we have. I know I said, part of the conversation was about how we take our faith that can weaponize it sometimes to project harm on to other people. So thinking about that, too. But as we're moving forward and thinking about this is all the mess, these are the problems here are the pieces where we need to spend some time unpacking and doing some pieces once you deconstruct you actually have to build something, right? Because you can't live in rubble forever, you actually have to think about what you want to build what you want to crack. And so what are some opportunities for folks to grow their religious literacy and Associate Dean Willson, I'm coming to you for a definition on that. Is that okay?

**Kerri Willson**

Sure. Yeah, perfect.

**Joan Collier**

Well, if you don't look, I went and got a book from it. The other day, because I like to get books, I went got some books. So I could understand I have a context for but she's my content expert on this, coming to you for that talking about building relationships with prospects, communities, some a rabbi professor, that some of the conversation here, and then learning how to spot personally held biases that we might have some things that folks can think about to do that. So religious literacy, how do we build it, how to build relationships across faith communities and secular humanists or non non faith communities that exist, according to the Pew report, they say reporting on something about 25% of people who are young adults, I guess, under 25, are considered the nuns now like Catholic nuns, but now that didn't like the faith, we don't do that. We have our own ideas about things. And so that's also part of our community as well. So when we hear Rabbi Cook, talk about religious pillar of religious pluralism, both folks are included in that. So what's religious literacy and how to build it?

## **Kerri Willson**

Socially, then, quite simply, it's really just having, like knowledge of and the ability to understand religion. Right? It's, it's creating spaces where people feel welcome. It's recognizing, you know, when you just as an example, when you have an event that you are knowing what dietary restrictions people might have, and you're providing foods that can meet the needs of the community that you're serving. I remember I've been at Red Cross for 17 years, and I remember one of the first events I ever held, and students coming in and asking what the kosher option was, and I was like, Well, because I, I didn't know. And I don't know that we were regularly providing those opportunities. I think back then the big thing was, you know, vegetarian options. And so we've come a long way in that regard. You know, we're we're making sure that we have kosher and halal and vegetarian options to meet the needs of our community. I don't want someone to come in and not be able to participate in a meal. There's something very, very communal, right about having a meal together. And if there's someone there who can't eat because we haven't provided food for them, that's that's goes along with not feeling welcome. Not feeling like this is your campus community. You know, we do have a workshop that we've offered on campus called Faith zones. It's modeled after the Safe Zone program. And it's really aimed at raising awareness, increasing awareness and helping us create welcoming inclusive communities. We've connected with national organizations across the country to so Interfaith Youth Core, for example, to attend conferences and workshops and be part of cohorts that are looking to increase our religious literacy, our understanding our appreciation of the wealth of diversity at Rutgers, and how can we celebrate that? Articles you know, other resources that can assist faculty, staff and students exist both on campus and off campus and you know, so like the books that you just shared or, you know, other, other you know, places where we can connect and even across the big 10 looking at other schools and seeing how they are supporting their faith and spirituality, programming, interfaith programming bridge building work across their campus has been really key for us.

## **Joan Collier**

So that'll be it for today. Thanks for hanging out with us, see y'all soon.