

*From Bubble to Bridge:
Educating Christians for a
Multifaith World*

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Bethel University professors Marion Larson and Sara Shady not only make the case that we can love our religious neighbors without diluting our commitment, but also offer practical wisdom and ideas for turning our faith bubbles into *bridges* of religious inclusion and interfaith engagement. Drawing on the parables of Jesus, research on interreligious dialogue, and their own classroom experience, Larson and Shady provide readers with the tools they need to move beyond the bubble.

Of Bubbles and Bridges

We've spent most of our lives learning and working in "bubbles," a common phrase used to describe the relatively homogenous culture of many evangelical Christian college campus communities. As a student, Larson spent four years inside the "Wheaton bubble," and Shady within the "Taylor bubble." Now we've worked together for several years inside the "Bethel bubble." Bubbles don't exist only around Christian college campuses, however. Whether we're involved in a club or an organization, a classroom or dormitory or church, bubbles form whenever we draw clear boundaries between "us" and "them" and focus most of our time and energy in the safety of "us."

From our experience, bubbles aren't entirely bad. But they're definitely limiting. Bubbles provide a relatively safe space for us to be ourselves; they help affirm and solidify our identities among others with similar beliefs and provide respite from the challenges of the world around us. But staying in bubbles doesn't prepare us for life in the twenty-first century. Life inside a bubble often fails to help us see the world from other perspectives because it doesn't provide enough opportunity for building meaningful and constructive relationships with people who believe differently – the kind of relationships we'll need if we hope to face myriad global challenges.

Bubbles isolate. As Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), puts it, "Religion in the 21st century can be a bubble of isolation; a barrier of division; a bomb of destruction; or a bridge of cooperation." Patel has famously described the challenge and opportunity of religious diversity in his book *Acts of Faith*. Mirroring W. E. B. DuBois's famous statement that "the problem of the twentieth century is the color line," Patel suggests that "the twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line." In response to this challenge, we believe, along with Patel and many others, that we must leave our bubbles and build bridges of cooperation and collaboration that connect people of different faiths.

For over a decade a movement has been spreading across college campuses to inspire and engage students, faculty, and staff in this crucial work. A problem, however, is that many Christians (particularly evangelicals) aren't seen as bridge-builders. Although there are many different reasons for this, some of which are rooted in stereotypes and misunderstanding, we must accept the fact that society at large doesn't perceive Christians as being all that good at loving our neighbors, particularly when our neighbors belong to a different religious tradition. At almost every conference and workshop we've attended in the last ten years, the same questions are always raised: What should we do about the evangelicals? Why won't they play alongside everyone else in the proverbial sandbox? How can I get them to participate in the interfaith events on my campus? Why aren't evangelical student organizations promoting interfaith work?

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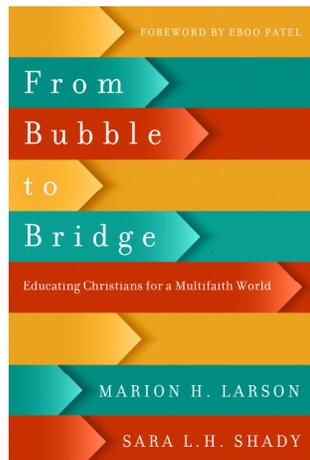
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A common goal of education, from a Christian perspective, is to cultivate a mature intellect and faith, one that enables us to lead lives of meaningful service as we actively engage and seek to transform the world. Over the years much has been written by Christian academics about the integration of faith and learning, and this scholarship continues to discuss the importance of helping students learn to weave together the academic, social, and spiritual aspects of their lives. Many recent works on Christian higher education have considered what faith-learning integration might look like in the twenty-first century; however, little attention is given to preparing Christian students to navigate a religiously diverse world. Christians need to be more intentional about preparing to love their neighbors, even (perhaps especially) when those neighbors have different religious beliefs. For those on evangelical Christian college campuses, such preparation needs to include interfaith service and dialogue on and off campus as an important aspect of education and spiritual development.

The type of interfaith engagement that we prescribe, and that's gaining momentum at hundreds of colleges and universities around the country, isn't about fostering theological relativism. We're not asking Christians to accept the beliefs of other religions as theological truth. Rather, we recognize that "while we all might pray in separate mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples, we still share schools, stores, and streets"; thus, interfaith engagement is about "improving these common social places and building understanding between communities." This is clearly consistent with the goal of many Christians to be positive agents of transformation in the world.

– Taken from the introduction, "Out of the Bubble"



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Marion H. Larson (PhD, University of Minnesota) is professor of English at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Previously, she served as a visiting scholar and sat on the board of directors for the Collaboration for the Advancement of College Teaching & Learning. She also served six years as the arts and humanities editor for *Christian Scholars Review* and has published articles on interfaith dialogue, faculty development, and hospitality as a metaphor for teaching.

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How to Engage a Multifaith World

How did you discover the need for a book like *From Bubble to Bridge*?

Marion Larson and Sara Shady: As Christians who regularly attend conferences and workshops on interfaith engagement on college campuses, we are often asked “the million dollar question”: *how can I get evangelical students to be actively and constructively involved with interfaith efforts on my campus?* Too often, when it comes to forging meaningful and ongoing relationships with people of different faith traditions, Christians retreat to the more comfortable “bubbles” of Christian college campuses and campus organizations. But in order to address the challenges facing our world today, we must learn how to engage and partner with people from different religious traditions.

As graduates of two evangelical Christian colleges – Wheaton and Taylor – and now as faculty members at Bethel University (MN), we know firsthand the many benefits of teaching and learning within the campus “bubble” where Christianity is celebrated, studied, and practiced freely. Such an environment provides the safety and support that helps to nurture faith development in Christian students, but it also often lacks the necessary challenges and opportunities for growth that interaction with religious diversity can provide. Not only is this an issue on Christian campuses, but this challenge also exists for other Christian organizations and communities that may be reluctant or even hostile toward the idea of interfaith engagement.

Over the past eight years we have worked to address this issue by incorporating interactions with religious neighbors into the classes we teach as well as in extracurricular activities. We want to help our students move from being residents of a “bubble” to being active builders of bridges with others. This book is an attempt to answer “the million dollar question” and share what we’ve learned with a broad audience.

Why is the topic of interfaith engagement so important for Christians today?

Larson and Shady: Christians need to be more intentional about preparing to love their neighbors, even – perhaps especially – when those neighbors have different religious beliefs. The need for productive engagement in a religiously diverse world requires that we utilize interfaith service and dialogue on and off campus and in our communities as an important aspect of education and spiritual development.

How is your approach to interfaith engagement unique?

Larson and Shady: Our book is distinctive in that we are the first to directly tackle, in book form, the issue that many Christians – particularly evangelicals – are reluctant to participate in interfaith engagement. The methodology of the book is unique in that it provides theoretical rationales for interfaith engagement as well as concrete suggestions for

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Q & A

Sara L. H. Shady (PhD, University of South Carolina) is professor of philosophy at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her writing is featured in the books *Faith, Film and Philosophy* and *The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education*. Her interests include the construction of healthy communities and political societies, the role of religion in politics, especially interfaith dialogue, and early to mid-twentieth century Continental philosophy.

classroom, campus, and community implementation. Additionally, the book has two major strengths: (1) woven between the chapters are short essays written by students, faculty, and staff on the frontlines of interfaith work among Christians, and (2) each chapter ends with discussion questions and applications, making the book easy to use in a small group discussion, classroom setting, or faculty development setting.

What do you hope *From Bubble to Bridge* contributes to our multifaith world?

Larson and Shady: Our book is the first of its kind to tackle directly the problem of Christian involvement in interfaith engagement. We take a broad and deep approach to addressing this issue, focusing on reasons why Christians are reluctant to participate, building an argument for why Christians ought to participate, and providing rationales and resources for how to get Christians involved.

Our book weaves together ideas from many authors who are not often cited together, including Martin Buber, Cathrine Cornille, Brian McLaren, Martha Nussbaum, Eboo Patel, and Miroslav Volf.

Our book is intentionally interdisciplinary and written for a broad audience. We integrate social and political philosophy, theology, and educational theory throughout the manuscript. Additionally, the book is readable for college students, faculty, staff, administrators, and beyond.