Kamala Harris’s interfaith identity could help her win the election

# Engaging openly with her Christian, Hindu, and Jewish traditions also models a healthy way to build coalitions for social justice.

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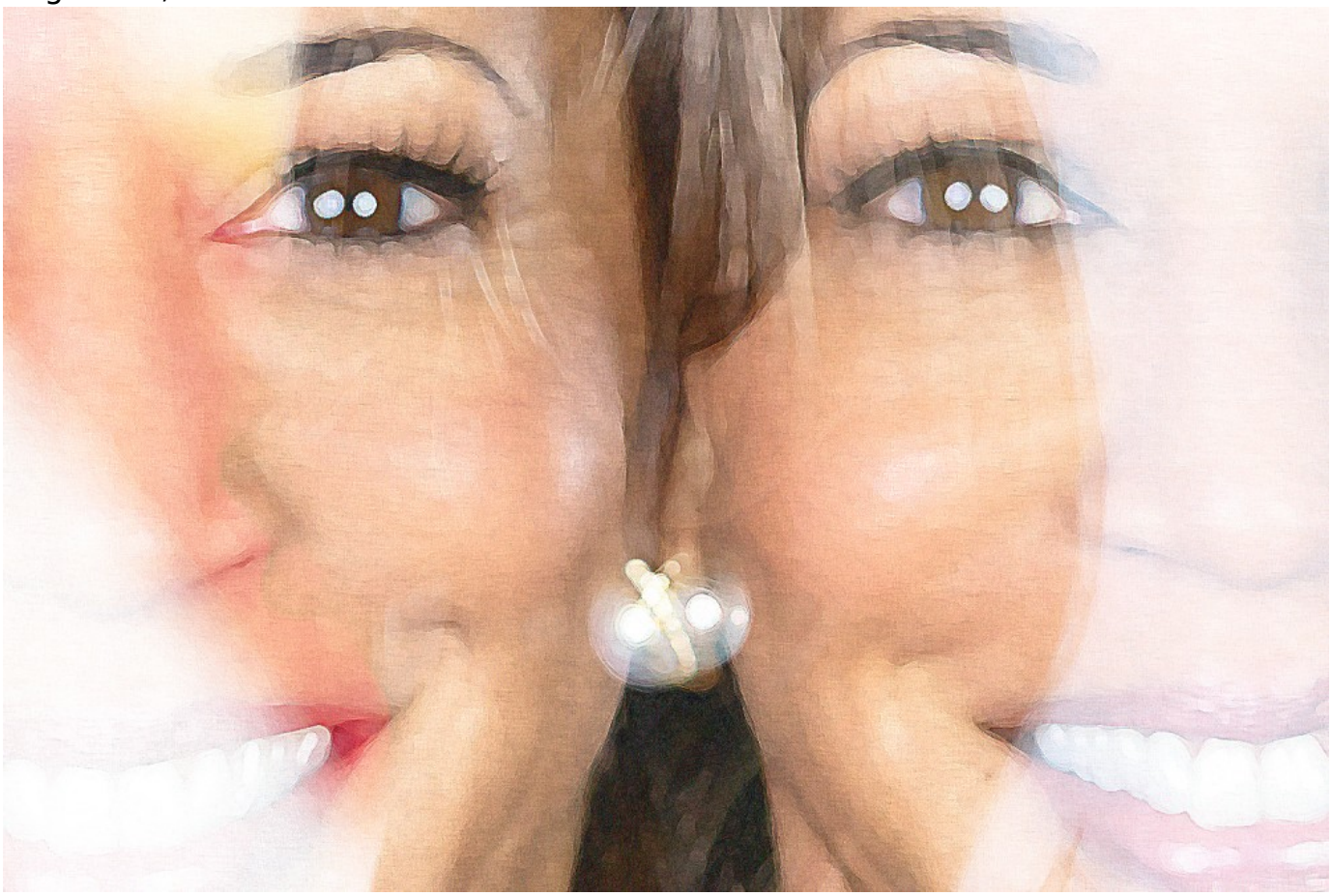

Century illustration

When Donald Trump told a gathering of conservative Christians that they “won’t have to vote anymore” if he is elected, he wasn’t only drawing from an authoritarian playbook—he was also participating in a long-standing US political strategy of treating Christians as if we were the only “religious voters.” The Republican Party’s

faith outreach over the past five decades has focused almost exclusively on White evangelical voters, who habitually vote in such strong numbers that they make up a far greater share of the electorate than they do the population. The United States' demographics are changing, however, and the number of Christians is rapidly declining, while the share of people from other religious traditions and no religious tradition continues to grow. If the Democratic Party is wise, it will recognize this new reality and work diligently to build a truly interreligious coalition. What's more, in Kamala Harris, they now have a candidate capable of doing just that—with integrity and authenticity.

In the former president's widely condemned remarks about Vice President Harris's mixed racial heritage, he ironically touched on the very background that makes her so well suited to build interreligious partnerships; this is a story she's lived her entire life. What Trump intended as an insult tacitly named what can help Harris give visible, tangible expression to America's religious diversity. The daughter of a Hindu and a Christian, she was raised in the Black church, but her mother also taught her reverence for Hindu temples. Later, she married Doug Emhoff, who is Jewish, creating an interfaith home for her new family and two stepchildren. Her life story reflects the lived experience of millions of Americans. Almost 40 percent of people who have married since 2010 married someone from a different religious tradition. The joys and challenges experienced in each of those homes is America in microcosm: in communities all over the country, families are learning how to weave their faith traditions together to create love and abundant life. And that's a very good thing, because confronting the intractable problems that plague us will require sustained work across political and religious differences.

Adapting to climate change, eradicating gun violence, uprooting racism—these issues and more are simply too monumental in scope to address without creating broad grassroots action. In a country where 33 percent of people are not Christian, that necessitates interreligious organizing. The good news is that the history of social change is filled with examples of how engagement across religious traditions is not only possible but galvanizes progress. While one of the iconic images of the civil rights movement is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama, less is written about the integral relationship between Black organizers in the South and Indian nonviolent resistance against the British Empire. In King's writings, he speaks extensively about the impact that the Hindu principle of *ahimsa* had on his understanding of how to fight White supremacy in the

United States. In 1959, King traveled for five weeks in India to learn beside Gandhi's close collaborators, and the lessons he brought back with him helped to shape the next decade of Black organizing.

Today, India continues to provide examples of coalitions working across religious differences for collective betterment, even in the midst of an increasingly volatile religious context. In fact, the subcontinent offers an excellent mirror to our own politics given the significant parallels between Hindutva and Christian nationalism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has pushed both Hindu supremacy and strongman tactics in ways that strongly echo Trumpism. Resistance to these tactics has been robust and coordinated. When a delegation from my seminary traveled in India in February, Christian leaders there shared how they were organizing with Sikh and Muslim colleagues to defeat the BJP (Modi's party) in the summer elections. At the time it felt like a distant hope, as Modi was strongly projected to gain a supermajority in the parliament. This June, however, India stunned the world when the BJP lost its parliamentary majority in a dramatic surge from opposition parties. In postmortem analysis, commentators pointed to religious minorities' collaboration as a significant part of what turned the tide.

If Harris takes the broad coalition of religious communities organizing against such tactics seriously, she has a unique opportunity to nurture a similar coalition here in the United States. While progressive Christians, religious minorities, and atheist or agnostic siblings do not, as individual groups, come even close to being a majority of the US population, together they can help build a governing coalition that can not only win this election but deliver transformational public policy. Moreover, the rise of overt Christian nationalism as a defining feature of the Republican Party provides this fledgling coalition with a common cause, a pressing danger that must be resisted.

Interfaith organizing cannot be accomplished, however, through the same playbook parties have traditionally used to organize Christians. Religious traditions are not fundamentally the same—what motivates voters of one faith will not necessarily be persuasive with another. Harris has already shown a willingness to lean into her own multiple identities instead of attempting to determine a monolithic message—an excellent model for organizers to follow as they collaborate across differences. This joyful embodiment of how diversity can harmoniously coexist is a message that will resonate with the millions of Americans whose work, friendships, and marriages are

likewise characterized by interreligious relationships and multiple identities. A candidate who can speak to these identities without asking that one identity be sacrificed in favor of another can send a powerful alternative message that will resonate with a large swath of the American electorate. This powerful voting bloc has rarely been addressed directly but will recognize the commonalities between Harris's life and theirs.

If she is elected president, I hope Harris will also publicly embrace the multiple religious traditions present in her own family because the spiritual humility produced by interreligious engagement is a stark antidote to Christian nationalism's fundamental arrogance. As a scholar and practitioner of interreligious dialogue, one of the refrains I hear from participants is that engaging across religious difference fashions them to be more accepting of that difference and less convinced that any religious tradition holds absolute truth. Holding a faith claim as essential to one's worldview and one's way of being in the world is different from insisting that it be true for all people. This perspective, which I describe as "confident humility," is powerful and desperately needed medicine for a country that is suffering from a flood of sectarian quasi-Christian beliefs turned into law. From requiring that the Ten Commandments be posted in Louisiana public schools to abortion bans that claim to be grounded in a fundamentally religious belief that life begins at conception, certain Christians have badly misrepresented the role religion should and could play in public life.

These laws are not only unpopular, they erroneously claim to represent universal Christian beliefs and practices. Instead, by embodying an authentic Christian faith that can joyously exist beside her mother's Hinduism and her husband's Judaism, Harris can show the country that a different future is possible—a peaceful cooperation that so many of us are already living. As a matter of policy, Harris could also draw upon her husband's Jewish tradition and her mother's Hindu tradition when discussing how Christian nationalist laws infringe on millions of people's religious freedom, which also exposes their inherent unconstitutionality. For example, she might point to how most Jews understand abortion access as a religious obligation—even a requirement—when pregnancy risks the life or health of the one who is pregnant.

The Catalan philosopher Joan-Carles Mèlich said, "We forgot the world did not belong to us . . . but the problem wasn't speed or even acceleration. It was the rush. We

forget that to inhabit the world one must not be in a hurry, that one must know how to linger in the present.” If Harris can encourage us to fully appreciate the religious and ideological diversities that surround us—to live fully in the present—she has the power to foster deeper relationships and to build a broader electoral coalition. This effort is at the heart of unwinding the political polarization that fractures our communities and restoring civic connection and collaboration. It’s also an essential part of nurturing bountiful life.

For these reasons and more, this alternative message from the Democratic Party will resonate deeply with those who yearn for connectedness: We are stronger because of our religious differences, not in spite of them, and we have a unique opportunity as a nation to make that claim a reality.