



**TANENBAUM**  
COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE

Imagine...a more peaceful world that respects difference.  
We are committed to making that vision a reality.

Thomson Reuters

December 5, 2016



**THOMSON REUTERS**

# EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVE: Prosperity through combating religious prejudice

*In this remarkable piece for our times, Joyce S. Dubensky, CEO, leads a ground breaking secular organization called Tanenbaum that promotes mutual respect to bridge religious differences and build new models of global prosperity.*

## **What does it mean that Tanenbaum is a secular organization?**

Tanenbaum is unique because it focuses on religion, even though we are neither religious nor sectarian.

For us, being secular means that Tanenbaum does not promote religion, denigrate it, or approach our work from the perspective of any particular religion. Rather, we recognize that religion is a powerful force in many people's lives and that we need skills for living, working and playing respectfully in a religiously diverse society and world. That's why our approach is on providing clear-eyed and objective resources, programming, and advice to our clients on how to thrive in a religiously pluralistic world.

I do know that some people think that the term "secular" means anti-religion or being pro-atheism. But that's not what we mean. We don't promote non-belief, but do promote respect for non-believers as well as for people of every faith tradition.

## **Is there evidence that religious tolerance contributes to economic prosperity?**

First, I have to say that at Tanenbaum we generally don't like to use the word "tolerance" to describe our work. We understand that in different cultures and languages there are important nuances to the word. However, imagine saying to someone, "I'm going to tolerate you." It's better than, "I'm going to be intolerant of you." But it is not nearly as welcoming as, "I'm going to respect you." What we mean by

“tolerance” is an evolving concept. I think of it as a first step toward getting to a world where we really live well with all our differences—including our different religious beliefs. And, Yes. There is evidence that religious “tolerance” or respect for religious diversity (as evidenced by greater religious freedom), correlates with stability and economic prosperity. One of Tanenbaum’s partners, the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation (RFBF), has done extensive research on this topic. Brian Grim, RFBF’s founder and president, co-authored a study of 173 countries which found that religious free-dom is closely associated with economic growth, while countries that have religious freedom restrictions and high levels of religious hostility tend to experience a negative economic impact. In another study, Grim and co-author Roger Finke demonstrated the correlation between religious freedom and peace and stability. Taken together, this data shows that with more religious freedom comes increased stability, which in turn creates an environment where business can flourish.

### **How about evidence within a company? Does religious tolerance contribute to attracting and retaining talent?**

Absolutely. We obtained lots of valuable data on this topic from our 2013 survey of American workers and religion. The data confirmed what we knew anecdotally and from our experience, that companies can have a positive impact on the bottom line by proactively addressing religious diversity.

One of our standout findings was that employees at companies offering flexible hours for religious observance are more than twice as likely to say that they look forward to coming to work. And that means good morale, which is always a factor in productivity and talent retention (if not talent acquisition). In addition, when companies have clear materials explaining policies on religious discrimination, their employees are less likely to be looking for a new job (32% v. 25%).

Besides the data, common sense tells us that religious respect and accommodation at work will have a return in productivity and talent. When employees do not have to jump through hoops to observe their Sabbath or have to spend hours looking through their employee handbook to figure out how to file a complaint about the lack of kosher food in the cafeteria, they are much more likely to be engaged in their work. They are also far less likely to be part of a negative rumor mill on their corporate culture. Years ago, I heard of a Muslim woman who rejected a senior position with a major Wall Street company for a competitor—because the competitor was known to be more hijab friendly. Experience and logic tell us that the reputation a company has for practicing respect, inclusion and finding ways to accommodate religiously diverse employees will translate into attracting more talent, and retaining it.

### **How much has Tanenbaum grown?**

Tanenbaum reaches its 25th anniversary next year and our story is one of innovation, persistence and growth. The Workplace Program, as just one example, was one of our first initiatives. Nearly 20 years ago, while most companies were vehemently denying that religion was ever an issue at work, we were documenting that there were real problems and opportunities. That was our starting point, and we’ve been working with companies to help them proactively address religious diversity and inclusion ever since. Our approach has always been practical and focused on how to put policies and practices into place, and how to prepare management to address tensions and conflicts involving religion in ways that make the companies more productive, profitable and attractive to diverse talent.

Four years ago, we realized that leading companies were ready to do more in-depth work. We therefore launched our Corporate Membership program but quickly had to add additional services to accommodate the requests for consulting, training, and other resources. We now have three tiers of services, with the

highest tier comprised of companies we call Corporate Leaders. The name is apt, because the companies in the highest tier are ready to be more public about the importance of respecting religious diversity at work. Their leadership helps us move the needle with their peers. In our first year, we had only five Corporate Members. Today, we have 28 multinational and national companies at various membership levels, including the Walt Disney Company, DTCC, Allstate Insurance Company, CVS Health, and JP Morgan Chase.

I think of that as the external growth, what people can see, the metrics if you will. There's the inside story of growth too. Tanenbaum is a learning organization. We study the data, watch trends, learn from our work and constantly evolve our thinking and approach. As a result, we've also grown in our content. One example is the national survey Tanenbaum conducted in 2013 on the experience of the American worker and religion. The findings underscored the immediacy of our issue and the value of our practical approach. 36% of American workers actually reported experiencing or witnessing religious bias at work. We defined religious bias as self-reports by employees that they are not being accommodated at work around religion-specific issues like scheduling, finding religiously appropriate food to eat, having to work on their Sabbath, and others.

We have other strategies for building respect for our belief in diversity across society including helping teachers to stop bullying while preparing students to be global citizens who can succeed when they encounter people from different countries, religions, and cultures, either at school or at work.

We also have a robust Health Care program, because 41% of people have made a health care decision that was influenced by their religious beliefs. That's not just about death and dying and needing religious or spiritual assistance. It's also about nutrition, modesty issues and whether you will or will not take medicine because of its ingredients. Doctors and nurses are not always trained in how to recognize or address these issues so that everyone gets the best care possible. This program was just an idea when I came to Tanenbaum almost 15 years ago. Today, we conduct trainings across the nation and offer easy-to-use resources for providers like our Medical Manual for Religio-Cultural Competence and our peer-reviewed medical school curriculum. The providers we reach give care to nearly 5 million patients annually.

Our international strategy in armed conflicts, the Peacemakers in Action initiative, has likewise grown well beyond our initial dream. Instead of merely identifying religiously motivated people who put their lives or freedom at risk for peace and studying what they do, Tanenbaum has now established an active Network of such activists that lets us work with them daily and help organize targeted interventions in hot spots worldwide.

### **What is driving the growth?**

There are a number of things that are contributing to the growth of our work. One has to do with our evolving societal understanding of the many ways people identify, and the expansion of the civil rights and diversity movements. In the 60's, a lot of our focus was on race. Today, we recognize that one's racial identity alone does not define a person. We all have many identities including our sex, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity and our religion or lack thereof. Bringing this perspective into the mainstream has taken decades, but it had to happen before industries like business, health care and education would begin to tackle religion and conflicts involving belief differences head-on.

Another reason for our growth is that religion is now firmly in the public sphere. Though many of us grew up hearing that if you want to get along with people never talk about religion or politics, the truth is we are all talking about religion and politics. It has been happening for decades, as religion plays an ever more noticeable role in politics and policy and as the media began to talk about it. This became exacerbated by 9/11, the resulting Islamophobia, and then the ugly way so many people are now convinced through

misinformation that all Muslims are terrorists and want to “Islamicize” our country. It escalated during the last election, and if anything, the subject of religion and our different ways of believing is more fraught now than in the past.

I believe that means we have more work to do to put respect into practice in daily life, and we see a lot of companies and individuals doing so. Specifically, in terms of Tanenbaum’s Workplace Program, we see more and more companies realizing that religion is an aspect of diversity they can no longer ignore. There are several other factors driving this shift, including demographic changes.

According to the U.S. Census, the foreign born population has grown (it nearly tripled between 1970-2009) and diversified tremendously over the last several decades. In the 1960s and 70s, the vast majority of immigrants were coming to the U.S. from Europe and were largely white and Christian, bringing with them “familiar” cultural and religious practices. Today, less than 12% are coming from Europe, and the majority of immigrants are coming from Latin America (52%) and Asia (29%), bringing with them religious traditions that may be less familiar/understood in the U.S.

The way people religiously affiliate in the U.S. is also fluid. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that, between 2007 and 2015, the dominance of various forms of Christianity dropped. For the first time, the Protestant population in the U.S. dipped below 50%, decreasing from 51% to 46%. The Catholic population also decreased 3%.

Simultaneously, there was a 1% increase in the number of people identified with non-Christian faiths (including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and many others). But perhaps the most significant change during this period was the increase in people who define themselves as unaffiliated, a group that increased 7% to make up 23% of the U.S. population in 2015.

Changes are taking place on a global scale as well. According to Pew, Muslims are the fastest growing group around the world. By 2050, Pew predicts that the number of Muslims around the world will be almost the same as the number of Christians. Interestingly, the unaffiliated population is expected to decrease overall (even as it rises in the U.S. and a few other countries).

These demographic changes are influencing corporate competition for talent. Together with technology and accelerating globalization, national and multinational companies have recognized that the best talent will include people from all faiths and none, which has encouraged them to become more proactive in addressing religion as a dimension of inclusion efforts. This is evident in data from DiversityInc’s Top 50 companies. Between 2004-2012, these companies significantly increased onsite accommodations like prayer rooms (32% to 70%), floating holidays (42% to 74%), and faith-based employee resource groups (5% to 28%).

Additionally, as various states began to implement different versions of Religious Freedom Restoration Acts and marriage equality was legalized, companies have witnessed more openness on conflicting values (and positions) among employees. The resulting issues can impact Diversity & Inclusion professionals, and show up in a range of ways, like receiving requests for a Christian Employee Resource Group or tensions over Pride Month. To manage these issues, many companies are now working hard to balance LGBT inclusion and respect for religious diversity among their employees and clients. I’m proud that we’ve been looking at these issues for a long time. As such, Tanenbaum is uniquely positioned to help companies think through these complicated questions and to advise them on ways to move forward.

## **Religion, Faith, Spirituality – is it all the same, is everyone included (even those w/o religion) / What’s the best language to use?**

We hear these terms used interchangeably, but they do have different meanings and connotations. I find the framework we use to be helpful because it both clarifies and reflects where there is overlap. That said, people are likely to continue using these terms interchangeably and with varied meanings, so we should be prepared to respond accordingly. Our suggestion would be to listen and, if there is any ambiguity in the conversation, to respectfully inquire.

At Tanenbaum, we talk about religion specifically as it shows up in daily life, not from a theological position. We broadly define religion as having three main components, all of which are evidenced in the workplace: culture (the customary beliefs, social norms, and material traits of a group), belief (convictions of the truth of some statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon), and practice (repeated or customary action). Faith is more closely associated with an individual’s beliefs and relationship with a higher power. For that reason, when we conduct programs for workplaces, we talk about religion, which encompasses the culture, beliefs, and practices of an employee that might come up at work, rather than faith, which will usually have more to do with a person’s personal theology.

“Spirituality” is interesting because it overlaps both categories, plus the category of unaffiliated. It can thus be part of someone’s religious or non-religious beliefs. People who are spiritual actually represent a significant portion of the population who identify as “unaffiliated” in terms of religion, meaning atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” Of that group, 37% describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” For others, spirituality reflects both their beliefs and the practices that are associated with those beliefs. And for still others, spirituality is the way to frame their faith.

When we talk about religious diversity at Tanenbaum, we are including people of all faiths and none. That encompasses all of the different kinds of faith and spirituality as well as those who define themselves as atheist and agnostic.

## **How does religious tolerance contribute to global sustainable development?**

Again, I want to point out that “tolerance” is not a word that we tend to use at Tanenbaum—we traffic in religious respect, religious pluralism and religious freedom.

To try and use this terminology, however, I would define tolerance as acknowledgement that there are beliefs different from your own—whether (or not) you agree with them. For me, tolerance would therefore be only an acknowledgement of what is and not genuine acceptance and respect for it.

That said, if we could achieve a minimum of religious tolerance across the globe, it would unquestionably contribute to global sustainable development. For example, if we lived just with religious tolerance, we could immediately reduce and even eliminate violent conflict fueled by different beliefs. Even more, it could lead to cooperation that enabled us to develop our globe so that people could live, have food, clothing, shelter and water. So that they could have education, economic options, health care. It would be a big step forward.

I like to think of global sustainable development through the lens of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Several of Tanenbaum’s programs that dismantle religious intolerance are directly related to them. For example, the UN’s Goal 4 is the establishment of inclusive and equitable education. Goal 8 is to develop and ensure productive employment opportunities. And Goal 16 is for peace, justice, and inclusivity

at a societal level. Tanenbaum's Education, Workplace, and Conflict Resolution/Peacebuilding Programs contribute directly to those goals through our practical programs in schools (helping kids respect differences and stopping religious bullies), workplaces (ending workplace harassment based on religion), and areas of armed conflict through our Peacemakers.

### **Who are the “Peacemakers”?**

The short answer is that Tanenbaum's Peacemakers in Action are unsung heroes and heroines, who prove that religion can be a force for peace and justice. My personal answer is that they are a very special group of people, who I am profoundly privileged to call my friends. They are very different in personality not just religion. And they use different approaches to their peace work. But they all view peace and justice as their ultimate vision, and it's the goal that they are always seeking even though they know how elusive it is.

A more comprehensive answer about Tanenbaum and the Peacemakers is that they are religiously-motivated peace activists who view peacebuilding as their chosen, life-long vocation. At Tanenbaum, we have a multi-layered approach to working with them. First, we identify them, honor them with an award, and then work with them by conducting in-depth case studies to tell their stories and uncover how they work for peace. We also work directly with them by facilitating their active Peacemakers Network.

To identify them, we seek peace actors who meet five criteria: they must be driven by religion to pursue peace; work in an armed conflict or post-conflict zone; be locally based or working “on the ground”; have had their lives or liberty placed at risk; and must be relatively unknown to the international community at the time of selection, without significant recognition and support for their work. Our focus is thus on individual actors, though many of them also work through organizations and with one another.

Since 1998, Tanenbaum has named 30 Peacemakers in Action from 23 different conflict zones, representing a range of faith traditions and denominations within them (Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism). Today, 26 are living and every few years, we hold week-long, intensive working retreats where they train one another and strategize. By 2011, however, the Peacemakers wanted to be more, and they established a Peacemakers in Action Network. The Network is facilitated by Tanenbaum and is an operating, ongoing collaboration through which the Peacemakers are regularly in contact, leverage one another's knowledge and experience, and plan peacebuilding projects we call “interventions”.

There are a lot of things to learn from them and more ways to work with them. As a society, we need to learn that religion is not only fuel for conflict, but that it is also a motivating force and sometimes a technique in pursuing a lived peace. The Tanenbaum Peacemakers are special, but people like them are working in every horrific conflict worldwide. They are resources for the diplomats and civil society leaders, and they should be supported so they can increase their impact. And that, of course, would benefit all of us.

### **What would you tell young people given all the problems our world faces?**

I'd probably start by apologizing. I can remember a time when I thought my generation would change the world for the better. And today we have an explosion of violence and extremism, escalating division locally and worldwide that so often is based on our different beliefs, and challenges with climate change that are beyond most people's comprehension. But we also made some progress.

So, I would probably tell young people a couple of things. First, that tackling these global problems is a responsibility that falls on each of us including young people and seniors. It is not easy. Success is not linear, and there are always setbacks. As a result, it is important to find ways to sustain yourself, to be resilient and to get to work.

Second, I'd suggest that young people pursue the path that tugs at their heart. The work of creating a just society and globe is multi-faceted—it includes all the challenges reflected in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. For me, the path is by honoring our differences and finding ways to treat those who believe differently from us with respect. For others, it will be different. But all the work is important.

Third and finally, I would note that some important types of change happen over time. Even as our globe is being transformed through technology, speeding communications and globalism, change in our global psyche still takes time. I like to think about the U.S. Constitution. It wasn't created because a group of smart men got together, sat down and just wrote it. The ideas it embedded had emerged, evolved, developed, and been debated for hundreds of years. And the changes formalized by the Constitution have continued to crystalize, as our understanding of justice has become clearer. I believe many of the changes we need will take time. So our work is to be on the path—and to keep our core ideals of justice and peace alive within the universe of global thinking.

### **What gives you hope?**

If you mean by hope, a sense of optimism that positive change is still possible notwithstanding all of our problems, the answer is that several things give me hope.

First, I feel hopeful because I see long-term societal change as a process that moves forward in fits and starts—like shifting how we practice tribalism. Today, we often define our in-group as somehow superior to others—rather than as merely different. Yet there are moments of progress. Across the world, and certainly across the U.S., there is a growing interfaith movement, where religious difference is respected and shared values are celebrated. It is a moment of progress that gives me hope.

I also feel hopeful when I encounter uncommon friendships. This happens in my world often, but it is most evident among our Peacemakers. Most famous are the Imam and the Pastor, former enemies in war, who today partner for peace as brothers. But I also see this when we convene our Peacemakers from all over the world. When I see Imam Ashafa from Nigeria welcome and embrace Yemenite Jew and Ethiopian, Ephraim Isaac, I feel hope. Their spontaneous joy in seeing one another reminds me of what is possible.

For me, our Peacemakers daily efforts are another reason for hope. They are fierce in their pursuit of the elusive goal of peace. They are resilient in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, staying focused on the goal even as they have to adjust their techniques. Knowing that they are there—in the midst of extremism, violence and slaughter—gives me hope.

There are other things that provide me hope. Our partners and supporters, who share the Tanenbaum vision. They give me hope, because it means we can grow and increase our impact. My colleagues, many of whom have worked long and hard at Tanenbaum and then, moved on to other ways of pursuing justice across the world.

All this gives me hope. But ultimately, I know that we can succeed over the long-term because of my grandson. When I call him, and he excitedly tells me how he got a gold star from his kindergarten teacher for being a good friend—he reminds me that there are many ways of being a peacebuilder.

*About the author:*

### **Please tell us a bit about your career journey**

I used to say that I had a checkered career, but someone told me that the inference was that I was crooked—and that wasn't what I meant. So I now say, I've had a dynamic career, with very different roles but some underlying themes.

As far back as I can remember, I have always had a strong sense of right and wrong. For me, it had to do with justice. And justice looked like equality and treating all people with dignity. Some people would call this recognizing the divine in each person. That's how I got involved in the Civil Rights movement, and then the women's movement, the battle against homophobia and so on.

Because of that strong feeling about justice and acting fairly, I've always wanted to do work that would contribute. So, I started my career as a case worker for the New York Foundling Hospital in foster care and adoption. My goal was to make sure that kids who had less opportunities than I had would have something better (At least, that's the way I saw it at the time). I learned a lot during those early days, including that I could not always make things better, despite my best intentions. I also learned something about the drive within religious organizations to serve. The New York Foundling Hospital is a Catholic institution and it was mission driven.

It was during those years that I met my husband, who was then a Legal Services Lawyer (who often sued my employer). On one occasion, he let me collaborate with him. And a year later, I was at NYU getting my law degree so that I could change the world. There is a saying I've heard, that man plans and God laughs. That's what happened to me. I went to law school and got swept up in getting a big law firm job to prove my credentials. But once I got it, I found that it was hard to get up in the morning—because I didn't feel that I was uniquely contributing. All my clients would always have good lawyers.

Four years later, a new opportunity emerged, and I became the first General Counsel of what was then the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, and which soon after became UJA-Federation of New York. There, I did the legal work of a corporate lawyer, but always felt that it was for a higher purpose. There were legal highlights along the way, like the merger of UJA-Federation and helping establish the Gurwin Jewish Geriatric Center. Yet what stands out for me is that I was asked to serve as the Executive Co-Chair of the Diversity Task Force for the staff. It was at that time that we brought in Sandy Cloud, Jr., who had just come to New York to lead the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). Sandy made a riveting speech for us on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, and I felt driven to actively work to stop hate based on who people are.

Within a year, I was working for NCCJ but not as a lawyer. I had been hired to do its Marketing and Communications. I was given a chance, and though I had a steep learning curve, I became the draftsman for NCCJ's voice for justice as we battled bias, bigotry and racism. As a member of senior management, I was able to push for greater inclusion and the fundamental fairness I believed in.

My next opportunity was when I came to Tanenbaum as the first Executive Director to work with the founder and president, Georgette Bennett. Tanenbaum was tackling a core area where people were—and are—often mistreated: religion. As a Jewish woman, I personally know about anti-Semitism, having experienced it quite brutally as a child. It was one of the reasons I understood how much it hurts when a person is judged by the color of their skin (or any other identifier) and not “the content of their character.” So, it was a perfect place to make a difference.

I've been here almost 15 years now, growing programs and being part of an institution that is shifting the paradigm so that religion, religious diversity, and religious inclusion can become the norm in our society, our lives, and across our globe. It is a privilege to be here and share in this journey.

*Original Published in Thomson Reuters' Executive Perspectives on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016:*

<http://sustainability.thomsonreuters.com/2016/12/05/executive-perspective-prosperity-through-combating-religious-prejudice-2/>

*Tanenbaum is a secular, non-sectarian nonprofit that systematically dismantles religious violence and hatred through Peacemakers in armed conflicts and by tackling religious bullying of students, harassment in workplaces and disparate health treatment for people based on their beliefs.*

*More information about Tanenbaum's offerings can be found here: <http://www.tanenbaum.org/>*



**TANENBAUM**  
COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE

Imagine...a more peaceful world that respects difference.  
We are committed to making that vision a reality.

Thomson Reuters

**December 5, 2016**