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History of Interfaith Leadership in America- Documented Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

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Rationale- What is the history of the interfaith movement in the United States? What does it look like geographically over time? This project aims to document the movement from the earliest known instance of interfaith action in America, to today's vibrant culture. This new resource is designed to help interfaith leaders and interfaith educators have a visual way to analyze and integrate key people, groups, locations, and events in the interfaith movement in the United States. This project is aimed to benefit anyone interested in having a multinodal and multimodal understanding of the history of interfaith leadership in the United States.

Development-

This project was intended to take a written history and digitize it to a scalable map. This would create an interactive tool that contains information in an easy to use format. However, it was difficult to do this, as we discovered there was no comprehensive written history. This meant that to move forward, a history had to be compiled from the resources available to us. This included books, interviews, and internet research. The operational parameters were established as "Interfaith leadership acts, events, or groundbreaking organizations in America". This allowed for some cohesion in the history, as this project could be expanded greatly with other restrictions or definitions.

Making the Map-

After the history was collected, it was separated by century, then by decade. This was done to show the progression of the movement through time. To develop the ArcGIS map, the history and the coordinates of the location were detailed in an excel sheet, which was then converted to a data file. The foundation of the map was a layer file of the country, stripped to just states and boundaries. The collected history was inserted as a shape file, which is displayed as points on the map. The maps below are of selected eras to show the progression of the movement over time.

Results:

Very little Interfaith history has been documented in America. This does not show a lack of Interfaith involvement, but it does complicate the issue of mapping the history. For the project, an entire history had to be written. This was a much larger project than what was initially intended, and is something that researchers in the future can develop, as the history I have compiled is by no means complete.

With less technology, and less documentation, most instances of Interfaith leadership from the 1800's and before were not catalogued. The 1900's in America contained many historic events, and Interfaith dialogue was connected to movements, without being the focus themselves. This resulted in a history of events largely covered by the media. As such, they will be remembered for their historic significance, and are just being recognized for the Interfaith work. In the most recent millennia, Interfaith leadership has been thrust into the spotlight as a "new movement" and there are so many documented events that it is difficult to catalogue.

Discussion and Outcomes:

The map of Interfaith leadership is a starting point for a history that is as of yet, mostly unwritten. This provides a starting point for future research. It has resulted in an easy to use visual diagram, which needs expanded upon as more is added to the known history. Each era presents its own difficulties in data collection, and this is reflected in the maps. However, it is not comprehensive enough to be an educational aid on a large scale. It can be further developed, and future studies would benefit from a scholar of history, as this project developed into history research.

Another approach to consider with this project in the future is to expand it beyond American history. This restriction was set to make this project approachable, but GIS technology can contain a world of data, while still only showing what the viewer wishes to see. This resource could be invaluable after further development, but as of now is just a stepping stone for further research.



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