

# 5 basic principles of *Jewish-Christian* interfaith teaching

Having taught six joint classes along with peer instructors from Hebrew College, including Or Rose, Jonah Steinberg, and Judith Kates, I offer five principles that have emerged from these classroom experiments in our interfaith laboratory.

**1** *Joint instruction by expert practitioners.* Each faith is represented by an articulate practitioner of same, not by a comparativist, no matter how learned or broad-minded.

**2** *Rough equality of numbers between Jews and Gentiles.* Though we almost never have exact equity, the ratios matter to ensure that no one feels like a guest, or a host. This is a meeting of equals.

**3** *A Havruta requirement.* *Havruta* is the traditional word in Judaism for the study partnerships that are integral

to rabbinical training and that are grounded in the intimate ferocity of the competitive and compassionate friendships between legendary pairs of early rabbis such as Hillel and Shammai. Gentile and Jewish students meet in dyads outside of class weekly. They read the assigned biblical and rabbinic texts out loud to each other and begin sharing thoughts before they have even had a moment to collect them. Jonah Steinberg of Hebrew College calls this, “practicing *not knowing* together.” These covenanted study partnerships are the real foundation of the joint class, and they begin before the course begins as the instructors, through their joint preparation, constitute the initial *havruta*.

**4** *Text-based and inductive classroom presentation.* Jews and Christians are Peoples of the Book, not peoples of the paradigms and theories. So we dig into Scripture, eschew overviews, and then pause to offer perspective and talk about the framing issues when they emerge or when inspiration strikes. We start every class with something we both hold in common, Tanakh/Old Testament.

The larger issues always emerge in due time. The differences between the canons, the common post-70 CE matrix from which Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity emerged: these came up in the first session of a recent course. A sketch of Christianity’s family tree with its three big branches was prompted by a Jewish student’s question in the second class. Instructors do need to be alert so as to seize the teachable moment. In that same class mentioned above, a course on the topic of Creation, a comment from a Jewish student about the meaning of the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 allowed the instructors to probe the group’s mutual misunderstandings about supposed Jewish legalism and supposed Christian antinomianism.

**5** *Shows of piety.* Despite the Gospels’ polemical digs at the putative religious hypocrisy of the Pharisees, we welcome shows of piety. A Jewish teacher might begin class with a *nigun*, a wordless Hasidic sing-along; a Christian teacher with a spoken prayer or gospel chorus. We are all mutually curious not just about what the Other thinks, believes, or says but about how it feels. ♦

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## RESOURCES

The *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*<sup>TM</sup> is a forum for academic, social, and timely issues affecting religious communities around the world. It seeks to build an interreligious community of scholars, in which people of different traditions learn from one another and work together for the common good, <http://irdialogue.org/>.

*State of Formation* offers a forum for emerging religious and ethical leaders. Founded by the Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue, it is run in partnership with Hebrew College and Andover Newton and in collaboration with the Parliament of the World’s Religions, <http://www.stateofformation.org>.