Activities Funded by the Grant

Our project was a congregational-based interfaith learning adult education class in Brookline, Massachusetts entitled, “Revelation in the Abrahamic Traditions.” We brought together cohorts of ten parishioners from three neighboring congregations in Brookline for a five-week class. The congregations were:

United Parish in Brookline, a Christian congregation triply aligned with the American Baptists, United Church of Christ, and United Methodists,

Temple Beth Zion, in independent Jewish congregation, and

First Parish in Brookline, a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

The class met at First Parish (the U.U. partner) on five Monday nights for two hours, February 27, March 5, 12, 19, and April 2, 2012. The classes followed this format:

a teacher with expertise in, respectively, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Unitarian Universalism distributed and introduced primary and secondary texts from their tradition that addressed the questions of religious authority and prophetic possibility. We then formed break-out groups that mixed members from the various congregations, and led by seminarians and rabbinical students from Andover Newton and Hebrew College (our partner school with whom we share a campus), for discussion of the texts. Then the larger group reconvened for general discussion and further remarks from the teacher of the session. At our final meeting, on April 2, all the teachers were present for a roundtable discussion of the issue.
The teachers and topics were:

**February 27:**  **Rabbi Or N. Rose**, Director of the Center for Global Judaism at Hebrew College and Co-Director of CIRCLE (Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education at Andover Newton and Hebrew College) on “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition.”

**March 5:**  **Rev. Dr. Gregory Mobley**, Professor of Christian Bible at Andover Newton, on “Revelation in Christianity.”

**March 12:**  **Dr. Homayra Ziad**, Assistant Professor of Religion, Trinity College, Hartford, on “Revelation in Islam.”

**March 19:**  **Rev. John Buehrens**, Senior Minister of First Parish of Needham (U.U.A.) and past president of the U.U.A. (Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations), on “Revelation in Unitarian Universalism.”

**February 2:**  A general discussion of the idea of revelation by the above teachers, with **Rev. Carl Scovel**, Pastor Emeritus of King’s Chapel, Boston (U.U.A.), substituting for Rev. Buehrens who was unable to attend.

By way of general description, our course offered participants the opportunity to explore a core subject in the Abrahamic traditions—namely, revelation—with expert instructors and with fellow students from other religious communities. Each class included a presentation by one of the scholars, small group study (in inter-religious configurations), and larger group discussion. The instructors were assisted by theological students—future religious educators and community leaders—from Andover Newton and Hebrew College, where we have been conducting these kind of classes for several years. Our primary objective was to take the kind of interfaith learning we have been experimenting with on our campus of Christians, Jews, and Unitarian Universalists and offer it to the community.

Among the central questions we explored were: How is revelation described in the foundational texts of our traditions? What are some of the ways these narratives have been interpreted throughout history? How do interpreters understand the relationship between God and the human being in revelatory encounters? How do all of these teachings shape the lives we lead as spiritual seekers, as members of our respective
religious communities, and as participants in the broader culture in which we live? We hoped that this learning experience would help participants deepen their understanding of their own traditions, gain greater insight into the sacred texts and traditions of their fellow students from other religious communities, and foster positive relations among members of the class, which specifically targeted neighboring congregations, that can be further developed in the future.

There is a context for our project, namely the atmosphere of interfaith learning we are attempting to foster on our campus in Newton. In 2001 Hebrew College moved from Brookline, Massachusetts to a new hilltop campus it would share with Andover Newton Theological School in Newton. Two years later, in 2003, Hebrew College, which for 85 years had offered advanced courses in Jewish history and culture, added a rabbinical school. Thus, for a decade now, the newest theological school in the country, the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, and the oldest—Andover Newton’s roots go back to the founding of Andover Seminary in 1807—have formed a partnership that has changed the way both schools do business and practice theological education.

Almost as soon as Hebrew College moved into its new buildings in 2001, a new feature appeared on the landscape, one that had not been sketched on the official blueprint. That new feature was the footpath shortcut between the campuses made one tread at a time by students who began meeting to talk about their common vocations and concerns as well as their respective traditions. Even before the faculties and administrations of the two schools offered interfaith theological courses and shared practical economies, this Green Line had been breached by the students of Andover Newton and Hebrew College. They wanted to learn together and from each other as they prepared for vocations as religious leaders. Andover Newton and Hebrew College, located cheek-to-jowl, began to discover the power and complexity of Jews and Christians doing theology face-to-face, panim al-panim.

We now see that our previous work had always been done with our backs to each other. Each school did its work in parochial isolation and was content to say something a little better than, a little different from its co-religionists. It is a brand new ball game when you have to articulate your tradition in the presence of a member of a different faith. Before we had been engrossed in the perennial intramural debates within Judaism and Christianity. The interfaith educational setting demanded that we raise our respective explorations to a new level. This was now on the varsity level and we had to elevate our respective games.
Spurred by this cohort of seminarians, the faculties and administration deepened their commitment to this burgeoning interfaith venture. We created joint academic courses co-taught by Jewish and Christian faculty and populated by students from both schools. We organized a series of Community Days where students from both schools participated in community service projects around Boston. The students formed Journeys on the Hill (JOTH), a group that spanned the student bodies and sponsored seasonal events organized around our respective sacred calendars and student-led peer study groups that continue to serve as an important context for spiritual exploration, relationship building, and professional development. Thanks to grants from Steven Spielberg’s Righteous Persons and the Henry Luce foundations, in 2007 we moved from our earlier experiments and ad-hoc programming to the creation of a comprehensive interfaith initiative called CIRCLE, the Center for Inter-Religious and Communal Leadership Education. Under its managing director, Jennifer Peace Howe, who holds a doctorate in Comparative Religion from Graduate Theological Union, CIRCLE is developing degree programs in interfaith leadership and expanding the interfaith course offerings (now a curricular requirement at both the Rabbinical School and in the Masters of Divinity program at Andover Newton), service learning opportunities, and liturgical programming. On the horizon, inshe Allah, is the expansion of our interfaith conversation so that it includes Muslims and members of other faith communities.

The primary feature that has emerged from our six years of intentional interfaith education is the value of havruta, a Hebrew word for “partnership,” “friendship,” “companionship.” In traditional Rabbinic education, havruta, the partnership of two rabbinic students over the course of years of study, is as integral as study at the feet of a teacher. Participants in a havruta study partnership become study mates, teammates, soul mates, and, at times, holy adversaries—iron sharpening iron—in the exploration of Torah.

We have made havruta study partnerships across faith lines a part of every interfaith courses. The instructors from each school who jointly lead the class form their own dyad for mutual learning. Students paired across religious lines are required to meet outside of class each week and given texts to read and debate together. Consistently, students point to the learning that takes place in havruta as the most valuable feature of the interfaith course experience.

The nurturing of personal relationships across religious lines is essential to interfaith education at Andover Newton and Hebrew College. For our schools, it is not enough to assemble students to learn from an expert, and certainly not from a learned observer of a faith that is not their own. All learning must take place within the bonds of personal
relationship. For this same reason, course work is only one element of our comprehensive program of interreligious education; it must be supplemented by extracurricular encounters around the focal points of holidays, service, and features of religious vocation and professional development common both to aspiring ministers and rabbis.

Our class thus sought to create the kind of programming we do on campus among paired Jewish and Christian congregations in Greater Boston. We brought together synagogue and churches from the same community, building from and deepening social and civic bonds that already exist, for a series of joint textual studies.

**What We Learned**
1. There is a hunger among congregations for interreligious learning. We limited participation to ten members of each congregation, but more were interested.
2. Just as it does among theological students, we found that interfaith learning enriches understanding both of the Religious Other and of one’s own tradition.
3. There is a need for adult religious education across the religious spectrum, and it was our pleasure to offer that to congregations in our community. The type of learning was take for granted on campus was viewed as a privilege by the laity in our classes.
4. Our theological students benefited from these supervised leadership and teaching opportunities.

**Inter-Institutional Impact**
1. The continued success of the havruta model, first employed in interfaith classes between Andover Newton and Hebrew College and confirmed in our work in this adult education project off campus, has led our two schools to explore this type of learning even further. We received a Wabash Grant for the 2012-13 academic year specifically designed to find ways to apply the havruta model to joint faculty work between the schools.
2. The Muslim teacher in our class, Professor Homayra Ziad of Trinity College, was so effective that Andover Newton has arranged for her to teach a class on Islam in January 2013 on our campus.

**Challenges**
Though our class featured a degree of confessional diversity, we did not have cultural diversity. The various Jewish, Christian, and Unitarian Universalist students shared roughly similar backgrounds socioeconomically, politically, and theologically. Our teaching team included a Muslim, and there was one class member who was Muslim, but we were unable to include a Muslim partner congregation this past year. In Boston
there are tensions at the leadership level between the Jewish and Muslim communities. This makes the type of interfaith learning we offer all the more essential, though it makes it hard to arrange partnerships.

**Recommendations**
We will make the identification and securing of partners from Christian, Jewish, and, especially, Muslim communities our first task in planning.

**Prospects**
Our next class is planned for the Spring 2013, along the same lines, with many of the same teachers, hosted by the Old South (U.C.C.) Church of Boston, and with a renewed commitment to find a Muslim partner congregation. We will fund it through charging a minimal fee to participants, offering scholarships for any who find that a barrier to participation.