PUTTING INTO PRACTICE AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH TO SPIRITUAL CARE WITH VETERANS

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Interreligious learning is only possible on the basis of a fundamental respect for the irreducible and unique alterity of the other. Interreligious learning implies the idea that, from the very start, human beings are dialogical and relational in nature (Buber) and that in dialogical encounter the other is both vulnerable and my teacher (Levinas). (Pollefeyt, 2007, p. 7)

How can we teach spiritual caregivers to respect the distinctive ways that people’s existential and religious beliefs and practices shape their responses to trauma? How can we teach caregivers to not impose their theologies of suffering on those seeking care? These educational concerns become urgent in multifaith contexts where spiritual care is provided to people of various faiths struggling to cope with and make sense of traumatic experiences. At Iliff School of Theology we grapple with these educational questions in courses on spiritual care and trauma in multifaith contexts, including the context of the military.

This grant helped us develop, deliver, and evaluate an advanced course in intercultural spiritual care. This skills- and research-based course on spiritual care was experiential, using qualitative interviews with veterans who use Buddhist worldviews and practices to cope with military trauma. These interviews were the result of a research proposal that was developed as part of this ATS grant. We received institutional review board (IRB) approval for our research project from the University of Denver in October 2011. We advertised our research on various websites related to Buddhist and military post traumatic stress. We conducted six face-to-face interviews ranging from one to two hours with five Vietnam War veterans and one veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces between November 2011 and February 2012. These interviews were used as the basis for experiential learning about intercultural spiritual care in a ten-week course with 20 students whom we taught from January to March 2012. Students received IRB training, and they read and discussed qualitative research methods (Charmaz, 2006). They
worked in teams to transcribe and analyze the interviews in order to appreciate how an intercultural approach helped them respect the unique trauma and religious worlds of these veterans. Students also read and discussed literature on military post traumatic stress, moral distress, religious coping, and Christian and Buddhist theologies of suffering. In the last week we brought our consultant, Air Force Chaplain Dallas Little, to Iliff to consolidate and evaluate our learning, especially in terms of what it is like for civilian spiritual caregivers to work across religious differences with veterans. Larry Kent Graham, Professor of Pastoral Theology at Iliff School of Theology, was part of these consultations because of his expertise on the impact of war on persons and families.

What did we learn through this project? Several important lessons emerged:

1. Intercultural spiritual care requires trust before collaborative co-construction of meanings and practices.
2. Hospitality is granted by co-researchers, students, and care receivers when they experience trust; researchers, teachers, and caregivers become guests who enter into the alterity and mystery of their hosts’ inner worlds.
3. The process of self-reflexivity is at the heart of intercultural care.

Lessons in trust, collaboration, hospitality

We learned that practicing and teaching intercultural spiritual care involves a two part parallel process of trust and collaborative co-construction of meaning. The practices of research, teaching, and spiritual care need to begin with a relationship of trust that grows when those in researcher¹, teaching, and helping roles respect the unique particularities of their co-researchers, students, or care receivers. We used the language of Emmanuel Levinas in order to understand how trust grows when we respect the alterity or “strangeness of the Other, his [or her] irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and possessions” (Levinas, 1969, p. 43).² We also used the language of phenomenological comparative approaches to religion³ to appreciate the mystery of each person’s religious, spiritual, or existential world (Paden, 1994, 2005, 2006).

¹ Qualitative research approaches like ethnography have been used in highly sensitive intercultural ways by pastoral theologians (Holden, 2011; Moschella, 2008).
³ We understand religion, spirituality, and theology as performative knowledge rather than propositional knowledge, and praxis as the way in which communities and persons embody and enact their beliefs. The intercultural spiritual

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This understanding of spiritual care rethinks the notion of hospitality, in that it is the co-researcher, student, and care receiver who become the host after they experience trust and then extend hospitality to the researcher, teacher, and caregiver. In the context of this course, we experienced this hospitality first as researchers when we were invited into the inner worlds of veterans. We also experienced hospitality when our students invited us into their inner worlds. As researchers, teachers, and caregivers, we tried to be respectful guests.

Once trust is established through respect for alterity, then a co-constructive and collaborative relationship becomes possible between researchers and co-researchers, teachers and students, and care givers and receivers. Within a relational space created by trust, people are willing to share their sacred practices and beliefs and be changed by each other in a collaborative co-constructive way. We experienced this process at moments towards the end of our research interviews and also with students as they explored how they understand and cope with suffering, in dialogue with us and, through the interviews, with the veterans. When students immersed themselves in the interviews through the laborious process of transcription, they were able to track how we used this two-part intercultural approach in our conversations with veterans, who took the lead in telling us their stories.4

This grant taught us about the importance of trust in the process of teaching. Halfway through the course there was a student revolt. Students had finished transcribing interviews and the next step was to teach them how to begin coding. We used a fishbowl discussion, in which I (Carrie) was in an inner circle with a group of students attempting a thematic analysis of a transcribed interview with one of the Vietnam veterans. I didn’t realize that several students in the outer circle were becoming upset and angry. They identified with this veteran’s psychological difficulties and felt judged by students engaged in coding. As soon as we realized what was happening, we turned our attention to the group dynamics of the class. We knew how important it was to model intercultural spiritual care through our teaching by listening to each student

care process we describe resonates with Elaine Graham’s inductive method of critical phenomenology (Graham, 1996).

4 For IRB purposes we developed an extensive interview guide focusing on military service, trauma, and spiritual coping. In the interview itself, we put the veterans in charge of how they wanted to tell us about their experiences. We opened each interview with a broad question (“Tell us about your childhood religious or spiritual background, your military experience, and how you came to Buddhist practices”).

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carefully (Ashby, 2006; Asquith, Doehring, McCrary, & Nydam, 2000; Doehring & Fontenot, 2001; Marshall, 2009; Miller-McLemore, 2008; Nuzzolese, 2007; Poling, 1995). The only way to re-establish trust in the learning process was to use this ‘pedagogy of performance’—teaching students how to do spiritual care through a parallel process in which we “teach the practice by doing it” (Cahalan, Hess, & Miller-McLemore, 2008, p. 83). This crisis highlighted the importance of paying attention to breaches in trust and how trust can be re-established when an intercultural process is used in teaching.

The important role of self-reflexivity

We also learned how the process of self-reflexivity is at the heart of intercultural care.5 In the fishbowl coding crisis, students who identified with the veterans felt that other students were insensitively judging the veterans. Since social justice is a core value in the Iliff curriculum, students were attuned to the injustice of those with social privileges (such as the privilege of never having been in combat) imposing their values on these veterans. In responding to their concerns, we explicitly explored the ways an intercultural approach takes into account the larger familial, communal, and social systems that encompass the caregiver and care receiver’s lives. These systems inevitably shape the power dynamics of helping relationships, as well as the social advantages and disadvantages experienced by caregivers and receivers. We decided to address this issue directly by having students identify the ways that their values and beliefs, as well as their social advantages and privileges, shaped their reactions to and interpretations of these interviews with Vietnam War veterans. We explored these social advantages and disadvantages by having students examine their childhood and adult values. They also detailed aspects of their social identity that shaped their interpretation of the interviews. They charted the possible ways their personal values were connected with aspects of their identity, and they compared their social identities with the veteran whose interview they transcribed (See Figure 1). Students worked on these charts in teams. Their final assignment was to take a section of the interview they had transcribed and note when and how their values or aspects of social identity shaped the way they coded this section of the interview.

5 Greider (2002), Lee (2002), and Ramsay (2002) detail the need for such reflexivity when it comes to awareness of one’s social privileges and how these shape learning and caring relationships and communities.
Many aspects of the course—doing transcriptions; discussing readings on trauma, moral distress, spiritual coping and theologies of suffering; reflecting on personal values and life experiences—helped students collaborate and co-construct their lived theologies of suffering—the values and beliefs embedded and enacted in their practices. They compared their lived theologies of suffering with the theologies expressed by veterans in the interviews. They brought these personal lived theologies into dialogue with the theologies they explored in the class readings.
Long range benefits of our learning
This grant exploring how to teach intercultural spiritual care contributes to ongoing scholarly work by elaborating pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey’s model (2004) of intercultural care, an emerging paradigm of spiritual care in multifaith contexts. Our use of this paradigm draws upon comparative religious studies and psychological research on religious coping, combat trauma, and post-traumatic growth. This approach also becomes explicitly oriented to social justice in its focus on self-reflexivity, specifically in its exploration of how social advantages, disadvantages, and values influence our judgment of those seeking care and the power dynamics of helping relationships.

An added benefit of this grant is the continuation of the research project with veterans. In the coming year we will be working with some of the students who took this course in order to finish coding and thematically analyzing the interviews. Our preliminary finding is this: using an intercultural approach helped veterans trust that we would respect the unique ways they constructed meaning out of morally-distressing traumatic experiences. We sensed that our theological training helped us appreciate the moral and theological meanings of their suffering. The veterans we interviewed helped us appreciate the ways that Buddhist practices and worldviews seemed to be exquisitely helpful in developing life-giving spiritual orienting systems that transformed shame-based memories that could easily cause moral distress. Utilizing an intercultural and theologically-sensitive approach in these interviews seemed to create what Shelly Rambo (2010), following Serene Jones (2009), refers to as “morphological spaces” which provide form and structure to experiences which, due to linguistic and conceptual impoverishment, would otherwise remain “unnarratable” (Kinghorn, 2009, p. 11).

Our preliminary analysis of the interviews also gives us insight into the ways that Rambo’s and Jones’s theologies of suffering are primarily oriented to Christian traditions, specifically theologies of lament and redemption. Such theologies often shape how healing is understood. The veterans in our study qualified the idea of healing from trauma by describing how Buddhist practices have enabled them to respond compassionately to posttraumatic stress and moral distress without the resurrectionist overtones of redemptive theologies of suffering. Such practices help them, first, recognize triggers and how they automatically respond to them, and second, help them contemplate their reactions through the lenses of self-compassion and
complex understandings of suffering. Each of the veterans came to Buddhist practices after searching for ways to reconnect with some sense of goodness, especially when they re-experienced the horrors of their Vietnam experiences and tried to avoid morally distressing memories. Buddhist practices dramatically changed their experience of post traumatic suffering and, indeed, their lives.

In our future work with coding and thematically analyzing the interviews we will explore how Buddhist approaches provide an alternative to commonly used redemptive theologies of suffering. They seem to offer (1) meaning making frameworks for understanding morally distressing memories, (2) practices for emotionally and spiritually processing disturbing memories related to moral distress, and (3) value-based commitments to helping other veterans. The role of self-compassion was central in helping the veterans no longer avoid the moral distress of their traumatic experiences. Buddhist beliefs about suffering helped them develop more complex ways of understanding their experiences, such that they could begin to comprehend the ambiguous and interconnected relational and cultural webs in which they were caught as young soldiers. Understanding the tragic inter-related dimensions of their suffering and the suffering they may have caused helped them give voice to lament and also assume appropriate responsibility for their actions. Buddhist worldviews helped them accept their moral agency in complex ways and incorporate distressing memories into an integrated sense of who they are.

These veterans have taught us to monitor how embedded theologies of redemptive suffering are often used to understand trauma but are also often unable to hold the lament associated with moral distress within the ambiguity of such suffering. In analyzing these interviews and discussing them throughout the course we taught we relied upon our theological expertise to appreciate the radical ways these veterans were living out ambiguous theologies of suffering at odds with commonly-used redemptive theologies.6 In exploring the intricacies of these veterans’ lived theologies of healing, we were very aware of the need for theological expertise, even within the context of intercultural care that values the uniqueness of these veterans’ existential worlds.

6 While Rambo and Jones offer a much more sophisticated theology of suffering that makes room for lament, embedded theologies of redemption often push people beyond lament to accept resurrection as the ultimate sign of healing.
References


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