Continuing the Conversation: Pedagogic Principles for Multifaith Education

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ABSTRACT: Offering a perspective from the Jewish tradition, the author recommends not only interreligious training for seminarians but also sustained engagement in dialogical learning with those of other faith traditions, enabling students to become bridge builders for the religious communities they serve. These encounters, the author explains, can help students create networks of interreligious peers whom they can call on in the future for support and advice as well as provide teachings and practices that can be adapted into their lives and ministry settings.

I feel honored that I was invited to participate as a Jewish respondent in this momentous educational process that informed the new multifaith language in the Degree Program Standards adopted by the Commission on Accrediting in 2012. In the spirit of the Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices meetings, I want to continue the conversation by offering several brief pedagogic recommendations for interreligious education in the North American seminary context. I do so with some hesitation, knowing that I speak as a Jewish educator whose knowledge of Christianity and experience in Christian settings is limited. However, I offer these remarks believing that there are some common educational principles that we share, drawing on my work with Jewish, Christian, and Unitarian Universalist students and colleagues over the last decade at Hebrew College and Andover Newton Theological School.

The social context

American Jewish and Christian leaders today are working in one of the most religiously diverse societies in the history of humankind. In hospitals, chat rooms, soccer fields, and family gatherings across the country, people from different religious traditions are encountering one another with greater frequency and with far fewer obstacles than in earlier times or in other contemporary locations. For our students to work successfully in this dynamic social milieu, they need training to deal with a complex set of interreligious issues.

As Diana Eck and others have written, the sheer fact of demographic diversity does not mean that people will interact with one another across religious lines in thoughtful and productive ways. To develop such an ethos—what Eck refers to as religious pluralism—a society must invest in educating its populace for healthy interreligious engagement. To accomplish this goal, leaders in different sectors of society need to serve as role models, guides, and facilitators. Like other elements of leadership development, there are key skills, virtues, and knowledge that clergy and educators need to cultivate to be effective actors in multifaith contexts.
There is a need to train future religious leaders in this field not only because of pressing communal and societal needs relating to religious diversity but also because interreligious education can help students grow as Jews and Christians and as leaders within their communities. It is my conviction that when this work is carried out effectively, seminarians have the opportunity to clarify their own beliefs and values as they learn about other religious traditions and with people from other faith communities. By comparing and contrasting various religious ideas and practices, and by hearing about the life experiences of practitioners on different spiritual paths, students can identify similarities and differences, and engage in further discernment. The goal of this work, as I see it, is to help our students deepen their Jewish and Christian identities and to help them develop the capacity to learn and work with people from other walks of religious life.

Relational learning

Building on the previous point, I wish to state that learning about the Religious Other is necessary but insufficient. It must be complemented with, as Mary Boys and Sara Lee call it, “learning in the presence of the other.” As these two pioneering interreligious educators write about their work, “Our goal is to transcend learning about the other in the abstract, as important as that may be, in order to have participants encounter Judaism or Christianity as it is lived by informed and committed Jews and Christians.” If our students are going to be effective actors in the interreligious sphere, they need to understand the ways in which people embody their religious traditions. As educators, we need to help our students gain insight into the animating questions, fears, hopes, and dreams of actual religious people searching for meaning and purpose in today’s world. It also includes honest reflection on the history of cooperation and antagonism between our communities and a critical assessment of current challenges and opportunities. This kind of dialogical learning can only take place in the presence of the Other. Meaningful multifaith learning also requires a commitment to sustained engagement with one’s learning partners, as it takes time to develop the trust and empathy necessary for deep encounter.

Whenever possible, I think it is important for seminarians to learn with peers from other religious traditions who are also preparing for leadership roles in their respective communities. This provides them with the opportunity to explore a range of personal and professional matters, participating in what my colleague Jennifer Peace describes as experiences of “coformation.” These encounters can also help students begin to create networks of interreligious peers whom they can call on in the future for support and advice, and with whom they can engage in cooperative ventures. Seminary faculty can serve as important role models and guides in these contexts by planning or facilitating various programs for (and with) their students and with colleagues (and students) from other religious institutions. Discussion of the pedagogic aims of these meetings and reflection on the encounters are critical to the learning process. I do think that there are important elements of interreligious
education that can and should take place through traditional book learning and within the exclusive company of Jews or Christians. However, as I said above, these forms of learning are necessary, but insufficient.

**Theologies of interreligious engagement**

The great Jewish theologian and social activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that “faith” must proceed “interfaith.” While the faith journey has no final destination (as Rabbi Heschel also taught), and we cannot wait to engage in multifaith activities until we resolve all of our theological quandaries, leaders-in-training need to develop working theological narratives that help undergird their interreligious work and move others to join them in their efforts. How do they understand the relationship between God, their religious community, and peoples of other religious traditions? What are the key texts—ancient and modern—that they draw on to help articulate their beliefs? How do they understand such foundational theological categories as revelation, chosenness, or resurrection in light of their experiences with friends, neighbors, and coworkers from other religious and secular communities? What about negative accounts of the religious Other in various canonical textual sources or in one’s own contemporary community? Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, offers a helpful description of a theology of “interreligious cooperation”: “By theology, I mean a coherent narrative that references key Scripture, stories, history, poetry, and so on, from the cumulative historical tradition of the faith community.” As Patel goes on to say, “Our challenge is to make those pieces salient, interpret and apply them to the contemporary dynamic of religious diversity . . . .”

**Ambassadors, witnesses, and bridge builders**

If our students are going to serve as effective leaders in interreligious contexts, they need to be able to articulate their values, beliefs, and commitments in a language that is accessible to outsiders. Further, it is crucial that as representatives of Judaism or Christianity they can contextualize their particular choices within larger historical and contemporary currents (religious, political, etc.). Not only is this important in terms of providing their dialogue partners with basic knowledge, but it also serves to demonstrate the fact that our traditions are rich and that internally diverse systems continue to grow and change across space and time. While none of us should attempt to speak on behalf of Judaism or Christianity as a whole, we must be able to provide others with insight into various dimensions of our sacred traditions, helping them with resources for further learning and explaining to them why we each practice as we do. In so doing, our students can serve both as ambassadors of their traditions and as witnesses to their own religious experiences.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, some of the skills I am outlining here are ones students are already working on in their existing programs. Jewish and Christian seminarians are regularly thinking about how to engage constituents who possess limited knowledge of or experience with religious
life and practice. While these situations are not the same, some pedagogic strategies can be used in Jewish or Christian settings and in interreligious contexts. It is also important that in their work as religious bridge builders, our students help their communities learn about other religions and with people from other religious traditions. This, of course, mirrors the learning experiences of seminarians outlined above.

Further, as our students learn more about other religious traditions, some will consider adapting various teachings and practices from other traditions into their lives and the lives of their communities. Therefore, it is important for us to explore with them how to do so responsibly, including what the limits might be of different forms of religious adaptation. Here it can be helpful to examine past instances of such efforts—intellectual, liturgical, social, and so forth. For example, how did Maimonides seek to integrate elements of Greek and Muslim thought into his philosophical system? How did Renaissance Christian mystics approach the teachings of Kabbalah? Closer to home, how have American Christian and Jewish feminists engaged one another and secular feminist ideas and initiatives?

**Programming goals and partnerships**

Among the skills religious leaders need to function as effective leaders in the multifaith realm, they must be adept at planning and facilitating meaningful programs for people from different religious traditions and with varying degrees of experience in such settings. What kinds of programs or projects might be most meaningful for various groups of children, teens, or adults? Whether one is organizing a text study, a volunteer program, or a holiday gathering, clergy and educators need to think carefully about the goals of their interreligious work. Are we bringing people together for theological discussion, for relationship building, or to attend to a social or political issue of common concern? Of course, it is possible to achieve more than one of these aims through a given initiative, but a leader must be deliberate in setting out his or her goals and developing programs that reflect these priorities. Here Boys and Lee offer us candid and helpful insight into this issue:

> Both of us have been to sessions advertised as “dialogues” when those who attend have virtually no opportunity to interact with each other, or even the opportunity to learn the names of those around them. Merely listening to the same speaker or panel of speakers and having opportunity to ask questions after the presentation might at best constitute a prelude to dialogue. What happens after the speaker or film is the moment of interreligious learning.?

As this testimonial indicates, we must be thoughtful and honest about the goals of our initiatives and work diligently to design classes, service-learning programs, or film screenings that bring these to fruition.
In order to accomplish the aims discussed immediately above, religious leaders must develop networks of colleagues from other religious traditions who are similarly committed to interreligious work. This requires an investment in developing relationships with clergy and lay leaders and making a shared commitment to help cultivate an ethos of cooperation across religious lines. This work requires time and patience as well as a willingness to persevere through challenging interpersonal or group experiences. The more religious leaders can learn about the needs and wants of the other communities they are working with, the more effective their interreligious work will be. It goes without saying that the deeper one’s relationship is with leaders and key stakeholders from other communities, the less likely it is that an issue will arise without warning. It is also more likely that the leaders will be able to work together productively to solve problems based on existing knowledge, past experience, and trust in and commitment to their partners.

**Conclusion**

Given the fact that American religious leaders are working within a societal context of great religious diversity, seminary educators need to provide students with meaningful opportunities for growth as interreligious leaders. Because our curricula are already full and the field of multifaith studies is relatively new, we need to be skillful in implementing new courses and related activities and lifting up important interreligious issues in existing academic frameworks. Additionally, teachers and administrators in seminaries need to make creative use of cocurricular opportunities for such learning. Finally (though I did not discuss it here), we should also consider what role ongoing clergy education programs might play in providing newer and more veteran religious leaders with opportunities for interreligious training (especially those who did not have this opportunity while in school). The goal is to help cultivate moral and spiritual leaders who are at once deeply committed to and immersed in their own religious traditions, and possessed of the skills, virtues, and knowledge to serve effectively in interreligious settings.

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ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this essay I use the terms *multifaith* and *interreligious* interchangeably, as both are commonly used in popular and academic contexts (as is the term *interfaith*). Discussion of the history and rationale of each term is beyond the scope of this essay.


3. See fuller articulations of religious pluralism by Eck on the website of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, www.pluralism.org. Various thinkers in the fields of theology and interreligious studies use the term *pluralism* differently. For example, compare Eck’s description with that of Paul F. Knitter’s in his *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).


