

Mapping the Discourse: A Case Study in Creating “Interfaith Community” on a “Multi-Faith” Campus

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Introduction

During the academic year 2012-2013, the University of Rochester (“U of R”) went through a collaborative process of creating a Statement of Policies of Affiliation for religious communities that serves students on the U of R campus under the auspices of the Interfaith Chapel. An older document, “The Covenant,” had been in effect since the early 1990s. However, because the scope of the religious diversity on campus had changed significantly since that time, it became necessary to re-visit the procedure by which religious communities affiliate with the university through the Interfaith Chapel. The goal was to create a policy that would recognize all of the affiliated religious communities equally, not privileging any historical group and offering all groups equal opportunity to access university resources and support.

In the process of drafting the new Statement of Policies of Affiliation, a host of issues arose, many of which exemplify the challenges that come with a religiously diverse community. Many of the tensions and issues that we confronted as we thought through how religious communities would co-exist in our university environment parallel the issues that arise in local communities in our contemporary society as the United States adjusts to the increased religious diversity of our cities, towns, and villages. In addition, the issues that arose as we struggled to define how we would create and live in an “interfaith” university community offer insight into what makes “interreligious” or “interfaith” studies as an academic discipline unique and distinct from the study of comparative religion.

The critical marker of “interreligious” or “interfaith” is the “inter” prefix, which denotes relationship and encounter between the different religious or spiritual groups. Whereas comparative religion encourages learning about different religions and how they are alike and different in their own unique ways, interfaith or interreligious studies involves understanding how those similarities and differences are manifested in the lived experiences of the adherents of those traditions as they come in close contact with people of different religious traditions. That there are religious similarities and differences is a given for interfaith and interreligious studies. What those similarities and differences mean for real world interaction is the focus of this emerging discipline. In a real sense, interreligious and interfaith studies is a disciplined study of relationships between people of different religious traditions and of the impact of those relationships on community life.

Our struggle to articulate a policies statement that everyone could embrace was an incarnational experience of interfaith and interreligious dialogue that illustrates the core vision of the academic discipline of interfaith and interreligious studies. When religious communities live in close quarters and must share resources and space, a “comparative religion” approach does not work. Comparative religion may teach about what the various communities believe and how they practice, but it offers little or no insight into how those communities will impact one another when they must live and work together in one community. Interreligious and Interfaith Studies is the discipline through which these kinds of real world interactions can be analyzed and comprehended.

The process of fashioning our new Statement of Policies of Affiliation offers a case study in what happens when people of different religious traditions navigate the shoals of their similarities and differences as they try to live together in one community. That relational process is of the essence of interfaith or interreligious engagement. In drafting this new policies statement, we had to grapple with a number of issues that are universal when people of different religious traditions share living space, whether it be a common building like our Interfaith Chapel or a common community like a town or village. Some of the issues are quite predictable, such as how to share worship space and financial resources, how to schedule the groups in ways that are fair to all, and finding ways to juggle conflicts when holidays and special events for one community impact the others. Some more complicated issues included how to define a religious leader or chaplain, indeed what term or language to use for persons in that leadership role and what that role entails. A more subtle issue arose in terms of privilege, as the religious communities that had been on campus the longest found it difficult to let go of their privileged status and welcome other religious groups to the chapel, fearing loss of their privileged status. Just as conflicts in the larger culture erupt when the group that has been historically privileged (in the contemporary American context, Christianity) feel that privilege slipping away, so did those communities react when their status at the university seemed to be changing.

The issue which took the most time to resolve was that of proselytizing. The university's policy is that groups that affiliate with the chapel agree not to proselytize and to respect the integrity of all the other religious groups on campus. For those religious groups for whom proselytization is integral to the way they practice their religion (Evangelical Christians, Chabad Jews, Latter Day Saints), this topic was of crucial importance. Our collaborative process of working through that thorny issue offers another lived example of what it is to do "interfaith" or "interreligious" studies, since the interfaith/interreligious enterprise, both in the community and in the academy, requires that those involved refrain from proselytizing in order to enter into the interfaith/interreligious experience.

Setting the Stage

The University of Rochester is a secular research university with an undergraduate student body of 5030 students. The undergraduate colleges include the college of Arts, Science & Engineering, the Hajim School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, and the Eastman School of Music. Graduate schools include the Simon School of Business, the Warner School of Education, and the College of Medicine and Dentistry. A large percentage of the undergraduates major in STEM disciplines, including engineering, biology, chemistry, and business. The arts and humanities are less popular as majors for undergraduates. Students who are religious perceive the campus to be very secular and somewhat dismissive of religion.

The university has an Interfaith Chapel, a standalone building on the west end of the academic quad, directly facing the library on the east end with academic buildings and the student commons buildings in between. The chapel is situated on the banks of the Genesee River facing a walking trail and the water. The River Level of the chapel is large open space with bay floor to ceiling windows overlooking the river. The Interfaith Chapel was dedicated in 1970, having been built with funds donated by Virginia and Gilbert McCurdy, who were Baptists. The chapel was built intentionally as an interfaith building, with a large sanctuary that seats 500. The sanctuary contains no religious images or art. It has rainbow colored stained glass windows in the upper portion of the building, an organ, a grand piano, and a dais

upon which a table is placed for Christian worship. An ark, housing some of the Torah scrolls belonging to the Hillel organization, is at the back of the sanctuary and is moved to the front during the Jewish High Holy days.

The second level of the chapel houses the offices of the various chaplains who serve the religious communities that are affiliated with the chapel. It also has a large parlor/meeting room (Brennan Room), a conference room, a small meditation room, and a full kitchen. The River Level is a large open space that seats about 300 (in rows) with large windows overlooking the river and the walking trails. The river level is the most versatile room in the building and is used regularly by the Roman Catholic Community for their Sunday masses and by the Hillel community for Friday Shabbat services and dinner. On one side of the river level is an alcove containing a *bima*, an ark with Torah scrolls and a religious storage area for the Hillel Jewish community in which are kept prayer shawls, prayer books, and other paraphernalia for religious worship. On the other side of the river level is the Roman Catholic sacristy, containing all the accoutrements needed for the mass, vestments, and also the reserved sacrament. The river level also includes a “bride’s room,” as the chapel is a popular venue for weddings. The river level sports a kosher kitchen and a catering kitchen, both of which are heavily used by religious groups for regular weekly meals.

The Roman Catholic Newman Community and the Protestant Chapel Community are both celebrating fifty years of ministry on the University of Rochester campus in 2013-14. The Jewish community has been on the campus for nearly forty years previously as part of a consortium of Rochester area colleges that comprised one Hillel organization. As of 2013 the University of Rochester Hillel community has become its own not for profit organization and hired a new rabbi to run the U of R group. The University also has a Chabad group, served by a full time rabbi, with a Chabad House off campus, but a short walk from campus. The Chabad rabbi participates in the meetings of the Interfaith Chapel chaplains, although his students tend not to participate in interfaith programming. Chabad has been on campus for close to twenty years.

When the Interfaith Chapel was dedicated in 1970, the communities that comprised the chapel included the Roman Catholic Newman Community, the Jewish Community through Hillel, and the Protestant Chapel Community, which is a group of mainline protestant denominations that pool resources to employ one chaplain to serve the needs of Presbyterian, Episcopal, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, and Baptist students. The university offered space in the chapel to the religious communities, in return for which they supplied chaplains and programming to serve the religious needs of their various constituencies. In the early 1990s, the relationship between the University and the three religious communities was memorialized in a document called the Covenant between the Religious Communities and the University. That Covenant document was signed by the President of the University, the then-Director of University Religious Affairs, and the highest executives of the local Jewish Federation, the Roman Catholic Diocese, and the Genesee Area Campus Ministries board.

The Covenant established the parameters of the relationship between the University and the covenanting religious communities. The chaplains were paid by their various religious organizations, although their ministries received a financial subsidy from the university in addition to space in the Interfaith Chapel. The chaplains were also entitled to have university ID cards, use the library and the gymnasium, and receive free tuition for courses at the university. The university employed a director of University Religious Affairs, who was not

responsible for any one religious community, but worked to support the work of all of the covenanted communities and to foster interfaith engagement. The Director also taught in the Department of Religion and Classics.

Even when the covenant was signed in 1994, some criticized it as not recognizing the full extent of religious diversity on the campus. Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish traditions were not the only ones on campus at that time, and some acknowledged that the covenant did not fully embrace the true religious diversity on campus, as it did not include Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or even minority Christian groups.

A few years after the covenant was signed, an additional signature was obtained from the local Islamic Center representing the Muslim community, although at that time no Muslim chaplain was assigned to the university. As time went by, religious diversity on the campus continued to expand with the creation of a Christian group representing the African American Church tradition served by a part-time volunteer chaplain, the addition of a part-time chaplain serving the Orthodox Christian Fellowship, the creation of a Chabad Jewish group on campus, an increase in the Muslim population that did then require the appointment of a volunteer chaplain to serve that community, and the creation of a student group serving the Hindu population. In addition, the Christian diversity increased as evangelical parachurch organizations like InterVarsity, CRU, Agape, and Basic all formed groups on campus and had some connection with the chapel as they did so.

By 2012, significant tension had built up in the Interfaith Chapel as religious groups that were not part of the Covenant felt marginalized and ignored, while those original covenanting communities and their chaplains enjoyed a significant degree of privilege with respect to financial resources, space in the Interfaith Chapel building, and visibility on campus at various events like Freshman Expo, Student Activities fairs, and public events where a chaplain is invited to offer prayer. To ease that tension and to create a process that would be fair to all the religious communities currently operating on campus, we took on the task of drafting a new document to structure the relationship between the university and recognized religious communities.

As we continue to live with the policies statement and the principles articulated in it, we struggle to map the boundaries of what is permissible interference with a religious group's practice and what is not. This is the stuff of "interfaith" or "interreligious" dialogue and the academic discipline of interreligious and interfaith studies. How the various religious communities impact one another and what influence the presence of the religious other has on how one lives one's own religion is the very core of interreligious/interfaith encounter.

In our particular context, the Hillel Jewish community was counted among the "privileged" groups that felt threatened by the impending changes to the process of affiliation. The Chabad Jewish group was one among several of the newer religious communities that we were seeking to include in the life of the chapel, and the Chabad rabbi was active in his participation in crafting this new agreement that we hoped would be more fair to all of the diverse religious communities now using the Interfaith Chapel.

Terminology

In the emerging discipline of interreligious and interfaith studies, terminology is confusing! At the University of Rochester, we use the term "Interfaith Chapel," although not because anyone intentionally thought through which term to use when the chapel was

originally built and dedicated in 1970. At that time, “interfaith” was the term most often used outside of academic circles when referring to activities between different Christian denominations and between Christians and those of other religious traditions. It reflects the then-prevailing Christian code word for someone’s religion as being his or her “faith.” I would argue, however, that *interfaith* is possibly a more all-encompassing term than is *interreligious*, in that it can be understood to encompass practices, rituals, beliefs, values, ethics, and behaviors that are not part of any particular historic religious tradition and thereby incorporates the increasingly large number of people in the American population who consider themselves “not affiliated” with respect to religion, those the Pew Forum has recently dubbed the “nones.” Indeed, the Secular Student Association at the University has chosen to affiliate with the Interfaith Chapel as a “spiritual or religious” group. They might have been less inclined to do so had the chapel been called the “Interreligious” Chapel, since they do not consider themselves “religious.”

The term “multi-faith” appears in the policies document as a descriptive term. It recognizes the fact that there are multiple religious and spiritual groups present on the campus. But the term multi-faith does not suggest that those groups actually have any relationship to one another or interact in any way. The term interfaith, however, does signal relationality and interaction.¹ We ultimately determined that “multi-faith” described the fact of religious diversity on campus, and “interfaith” expressed the commitment to building and maintaining intentional community between and among the different groups. Our distinction between these terms parallels Diana Eck’s discussion of “diversity” and “pluralism”:

The language of pluralism is the language not just of difference but of engagement, involvement, and participation. It is the language of traffic, exchange, dialogue, and debate. It is the language of the symphony orchestra and the jazz ensemble. ... [P]luralism is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences.

First, *pluralism* is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality....Pluralism requires participation, and attunement to the life and energies of one another.²

So for our purposes “interfaith” worked out to be the best term as it felt more expansive than “interreligious,” which seemed to presuppose a recognized religious tradition, and it suggests interaction and involvement, relationship and engagement between the various groups.³

Catherine Cornille’s prolific works on interreligious dialogue and interreligious hermeneutics provides support for our argument that the word “interreligious” connotes interaction between recognized historic religious traditions. In Cornille’s corpus, the articles and books all deal with recognized historic religions interacting, dialoguing, and engaging one

¹ Stephen Graham, “Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices in a Multi-Faith Society: An ATS Project 2010-2102,” *Theological Education*, Volume 47, Number 1 (2010), 5.

² Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), 69-70.

³ Another very minor, but practical reality, is that *interfaith* is simply easier to say and spell! “The Interreligious Chapel” would be more of a mouthful than university administrators want to handle in day to day discourse! And, when the chapel was built and dedicated, that was the term used, and it is quite literally engraved in stone on the building.

another. The underlying assumption in Cornille's works is that the dialogue partners are members of recognized historic religions, including indigenous religions.⁴

Conversely, the term "interfaith" often appears to describe groups or organizations that may not be rooted in any particular existing religious tradition, but that may borrow from or use rituals, practices, texts, music, art, or other artifacts of different world religions, or such as are uniquely created for that group to express its own worldview, belief system, spirituality, or practices. An example would be a description on the website of the iNtuitiveTimes Institute, which trains "interfaith ministers" for ordination. On their website, they describe an Ordained Interfaith Institute Minister:

OIIM Interfaith Minister has studied at least three, and usually six, different major religious traditions and is trained to help the individual to develop a sense of personal spirituality, drawing on the spiritual practices of many different religions.⁵

This group is just one of many that train specifically "interfaith ministers," people who are not rooted in one historic religious tradition, but rather learn about many different religions and pick and choose practices and beliefs from among those religions as they carry out their ministry. Whatever one may think of the training and ordination of such ministers, the fact that numerous organizations exist to train and deploy them suggests something about the market in our contemporary population for that kind of "interfaith" ministry.

The use of the term "interfaith" as described above feeds into a concern that many people within the historic religious traditions have about the whole enterprise of interfaith engagement. Some resist interfaith or interreligious dialogue, because they believe that such efforts are an attempt to create a "one size fits all" religion to which everyone must belong. There is a common misconception that "interfaith" or "interreligious" means that the separate identities of the various religious groups are sacrificed in the name of creating some uber-religion that will satisfy everyone, thereby either eliminating or watering down existing faith traditions. As described above, some people who call themselves "interfaith" are people who have chosen to affiliate with or create a community that intentionally borrows or incorporates rituals, beliefs and practices of a variety of world religious traditions, while not strongly identifying with any one of them. However, many of those who are committed to the "interfaith movement" are those who are deeply rooted in their own historic religious tradition and who wish to engage those of other historic religious traditions for social, political, personal, and spiritual reasons. The term "interfaith" may cause confusion if one does not probe to discover which version of the word "interfaith" is meant in a particular context.

The "interfaith movement," which is now a global movement incorporating thousands of different organizations and coalitions, committees, commissions, and dialogue groups both formal and informal all over the world, refers commonly to those who engage in dialogue between and amongst representatives of existing, historic world religions. This movement's origin is usually pegged to the first Parliament of the World's Religions that was held in Chicago in 1893. For people who consider themselves heirs of that movement, or who identify

⁴ See, Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008); Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010).

⁵ See, <http://interfaithministry.com/institute/minister.htm>, Retrieved 10/17/2013.

with it, interfaith encounter means learning about the similarities and differences between and amongst the historic religious traditions and growing into the ability to celebrate and appreciate both the similarities and the differences. With respect to differences in particular, the goal of the interfaith/interreligious enterprise is to reduce the fear of difference so that the potential and the opportunity that it presents for innovation, wisdom, and deepened understanding of self and other and even of the divine, becomes possible. In our policies document, we made it clear that the mission of the Interfaith Chapel includes both supporting the individual religious communities to grow and thrive in their own right and to bring those communities into dialogue and engagement with one another in a variety of ways. However, our use of the term “interfaith” also has the side benefit of encompassing those who might consider themselves “interfaith,” because they have chosen to follow a path that incorporates the beliefs, practices, or rituals of a variety of religious traditions. While this particular constituency was not represented in our policies document discussions, that group is not excluded by our use of the term “Interfaith Chapel.”

Notwithstanding the ambiguity inherent in the choice of the term “interfaith,” its use in our context is appropriate. In the University setting, we want our chapel to be welcoming to students who do not affiliate with any particular religious tradition as well as to those who do. The term “interfaith” captures what Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen describe as the “pluriformity” of religion on university campuses today:

This pluriformity has two sides. One side represents traditional, ‘organized’ religion, and the main change here is that the range of organized religions in America has increased exponentially...The other side of today’s religious pluriformity, however, makes things even more complex and confusing: The boundary line between what is and what is not religion has become thoroughly blurred. If secularity is like freshwater and religion is like saltwater, life in America is now thoroughly brackish.⁶

So for our purposes, on a multi-faith secular university campus, the term “interfaith” is a good choice to describe the work and mission of the chapel. It encompasses both the historic religious traditions in dialogue and encounter with one another, and the more free form, do-it-yourself pluriform spiritual and religious practices and beliefs of many university students today. In addition, it signals that the important aspect of our life together is engagement with one another across our differences.

As the academic discipline of Interfaith and Interreligious Studies takes shape in the coming years, the inclusiveness of both terms will be important for scholars working in this emerging discipline. The academic enterprise will include study of the interaction and relationships between and among existing historic religions as well as the emergence of avowedly “interfaith” spiritualities and/or religious groups and their interaction with the pre-existing historic religions. Both terms are needed so as to embrace the pluriformity of American religious and spiritual life in the 21st century.

Participatory Spiritual and Religious Dialogue

One of the requirements of the policies of affiliation with the Interfaith Chapel is that all religious and spiritual groups that choose to affiliate must agree to participate in explicitly

⁶ Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

interfaith programming on campus, and those groups that are served by chaplains or adult religious leaders must send that leader to our weekly chaplains meeting so as to foster interfaith engagement, understanding, and cooperation. This is an integral piece of what it means to be part of an interfaith community. If we were merely creating a multi-faith chapel, each community could simply do its own thing and never interact with the other communities in the building other than to reserve space or work out conflicts in sharing the physical resources of the chapel. We were firmly committed to the proposition that being part of the Interfaith Chapel requires interfaith engagement on multiple levels. This requirement of engagement is integral to what it means to do interfaith or interreligious study. Just as our affiliated communities must be willing to engage in various types of activities with the other religious groups in the chapel, the discipline of interfaith and interreligious studies requires of the scholar more than merely the linguistic knowing that has been so much a part of the scholarly study of religions. The discipline moves the scholar out into the world of interfaith and interreligious encounter as a student of that encounter in whatever diverse ways may be required to apprehend the material being studied. As Ursula King has argued, “the challenge of interfaith encounter is both experiential *and* academic...both methodological and substantive.”⁷ Interreligious and Interfaith Studies can rise to the challenges King posed in her article on the future of religious studies:

Yet, besides the challenging task of critical analysis, there also exists a great need for creative synthesis and forward-looking vision. Interfaith encounter and dialogue can be experienced as a liberating praxis freeing partners in dialogue from the oppressive, narrow boundaries of their own standpoints, revealing the limited positions of their respective religious and cultural traditions, through which the world has been mediated to them. Within a global context the active engagement with religious pluralism and encounter can lead to both mutual understanding and mutual transformation...⁸

Interfaith engagement is by its very nature, participatory. This affords different ways of knowing than merely studying texts or philosophical writings. As Ferrer and Sherman write:

Contrary to the hegemonic claims of the linguistic paradigm, then, it is becoming increasingly plausible that epistemological frameworks that take into account a wider-and perhaps *deeper* engagement with human faculties (not only discursive reason, but also intuition, imagination, somatic knowing, empathic discernment, moral awareness, aesthetic sensibility, meditation, and contemplation) may be critical in the assessment of many religious knowledge claims.⁹

In crafting our policies of affiliation, we required participating religious and spiritual communities to commit to various kinds of engagement, including educational dialogues, shared worship experiences, shared community service projects, and shared social activities such as meals. In all these forms of engagement, the different religious communities have the opportunity to learn from and about one another in ways other than a purely linguistic epistemological approach to studying another religion.

⁷ Ursula King, “Is There a Future for Religious Studies as We Know It? Some Postmodern, Feminist, and Spiritual Challenges,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 70, No. 2, June 2002, 377.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman, *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 11.

This participatory engagement is of the essence of being an interfaith community. The kind of learning and knowing that happens in such an environment is of a different quality than a comparative study of another religious tradition. In comparative religion, the student learns about the other religion and compares it to his or her own or to another religion about which the student has learned. In comparative theology, the student delves deeply into the texts and traditions of the other religious tradition before coming back to the home tradition with new insights to bring to the theological enterprise in the home tradition. In both of these disciplines, the knowing is primarily linguistic and rational, using intellect and mind. In the participatory approach, other faculties of human knowing are employed to plumb the depths of human religious experience and wisdom.

In the participatory paradigm, the student uses different faculties to learn about the other religious tradition, including prayer, meditation, chanting, activities in the community, and social activities with those of other religious traditions. All of those lived encounters are ways of coming to know the religious other. As Ferrer explains, the participatory approach is “more sensitive to the spiritual evidence and honors the diversity of ways in which spiritual awareness can be expressed,”¹⁰ as opposed to the purely academic or scholarly study of different religious paths. I submit that this participatory approach distinguishes interfaith and interreligious studies from its cousins, comparative religion or comparative theology. The actual participation in religious observances, in dialogues on religious, spiritual, or other issues of existential importance, sharing meals, sharing in service to the community, are all ways of coming to know the religious other and the religious ultimate (however that ultimate is named or apprehended in one’s own tradition,) that are unique to the discipline of interfaith and interreligious studies.

In the process of creating the policies statement, some of the chaplains in the historic covenanting religious groups balked at the emphasis on interfaith engagement. There was some hesitation about the idea of having to engage with the other religious groups in the intentional way called for in the policies statement. When pushed to explain the concern, it became evident that they feared that the requirement that they participate in interfaith activities would detract from their mission to build up and foster commitment of students to their own particular religious community. I had to repeatedly emphasize that interfaith engagement could, in fact, become a vehicle for deepening the students’ understanding of and commitment to their own tradition while simultaneously opening them up to the religious others in the university community in ways that would build up the larger community and allow for a genuine celebration of the diversity that exists on campus.¹¹

Ferrer writes about the participatory turn and religious pluralism, explaining that the participatory approach can help to defuse the conflicts that often arise out of conflicting truth claims between religious groups. Ferrer ascribes to the belief that there are different religious ends to which each religious tradition is moving, and that, in fact, the different traditions are co-creators of spiritual reality.¹² Ferrer says, “Once traditions stop thinking of themselves as aprioristically superior or closer to *the* Truth, peoples from diverse belief systems can encounter each other in the spirit of critical dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and mutual

¹⁰ Ibid., 136.

¹¹ Denise Yarbrough, “Interfaith Encounter in the Pews: Bringing Interfaith Dialogue Home”, *The World’s Religions After September 11*, Vol. 3, *The Interfaith Dimension*, Arvind Sharma, ed., (Westport: Praeger Press, 2009), 220-221.

¹² Ferrer, 149

transformation.”¹³ Indeed, he adds, the religious differences then become cause for “wonder and celebration.” He suggests the image of a tree to capture what it means to say that different religious traditions are co-creators enacting spiritual truth. The different religions, he suggests, have a common root,

[T]he deep bond constituted by the undetermined dimension of the mystery in which all traditions participate in the co-creation of their spiritual insights and cosmologies...Like members of a healthy family, religious people may then stop attempting to impose their particular perception on others and might instead become a supportive and enriching force for the creative ‘spiritual individuation’ of other practitioners, both within and outside their traditions...This account would be consistent with a view of the mystery, the cosmos, and/or spirit as moving from a primordial state of undifferentiated unity toward one of infinite differentiation-in-communion.¹⁴

Ferrer’s explanation of the different religions and spiritualities of the world as evidence that the spirit or cosmos is moving from undifferentiated unity toward a state of infinite differentiation is echoed by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Sacks understands the differentiation between religions as evidence of humankind’s progress towards spiritual maturity:

The challenge to the religious imagination is to see God’s image in the one who is not in our image. That is the converse of tribalism. But it is also something other than universalism. It takes difference seriously...The faith of Israel declares the oneness of God and the plurality of man. It moves beyond both tribalism and its antithesis universalism...Tribalism denies rights to the outsider. Universalism grants rights if and only if the outsider converts, conforms, assimilates, and thus ceases to be an outsider. ...The critical test of any order is: does it make space for otherness? Does it acknowledge the dignity of difference?...If we are to live in close proximity to difference, as in a global age we do, we will need more than a code of rights, even more than mere tolerance. We will need to understand that just as the natural environment depends on biodiversity, so the human environment depends on cultural diversity, because no one civilization encompasses all the spiritual, ethical and artistic expressions of mankind.¹⁵

In insisting that religious communities on our campus agree to interfaith engagement, we affirm our commitment to continuing that journey from undifferentiated unity to a state of infinite differentiation-in-communion. We state our commitment to becoming a place where the dignity of difference is a core value. Our context in the Interfaith Chapel is somewhat analogous to those who live in interfaith families and marriages. Proximity, shared physical space, shared financial resources, and daily contact in the university community throw the various religious communities together in ways that require that they go beyond mere “tolerance” of the religious other. At a bare minimum, it forces them to “deep tolerance,” where they cannot walk away when the differences between them cause conflict, but rather must find ways to work through the differences, hopefully coming to a place of deeper appreciation and understanding of those differences. In her study of interfaith families, Kate McCarthy writes:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 150,151

¹⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, (London: Continuum, 2002), 60-61.

The discipline of committed relationship has pressed many of the interfaith couples I observed into deeper levels of respect for and engagement with one another's differences. ... This sense of interfaith relationship as a process rather than a prenegotiated settlement is a hallmark of the deep tolerance I came to see in many mixed-faith couples...[T]he deep tolerance of living intimately with that difference can be difficult and hurtful.¹⁶

In many respects, life in the university Interfaith Chapel is its own form of "interfaith marriage." The communities live cheek by jowl with one another, share kitchens, living spaces, worship space, financial resources, and, in many cases, student participants. The Christian groups agree every year during Passover, which is almost always also Holy Week, to turn over the lowest level of the chapel building to the Jewish community so that it can be *kashered* and used exclusively by that community for the entire holiday. This means the Christian groups must move their worship venues, clean out one of their kitchens, and radically re-organize how they do their work during the busiest week of their liturgical year. That kind of intimate engagement of these various living religions is the stuff of interfaith and interreligious studies and dialogue.

For the academic discipline of interfaith and interreligious studies, the attitude of wonder and celebration at the differences between religious and spiritual traditions and the acceptance of those differences as inevitable, welcomed, and necessary is another facet of what it means to do interfaith or interreligious studies. There is no need to make the traditions or their conflicting truth claims cohere. It is not the ends to which these traditions are moving that matters, rather it is the process of their interaction with each other, which itself co-creates spiritual truths that is important. Again, this distinguishes interfaith and interreligious studies from comparative religion or theology.¹⁷

Our university struggled to articulate a process by which diverse religious communities could live together in an intentional interfaith community in order to better serve our students and the university's mission to prepare them for adult leadership in the 21st century. The veritable explosion of religious diversity both in American society at large and on our college campuses in the past two decades could lead to one of two responses: (1) celebrate the diversity and understand it as a gift to be mined for yet unimaginable creative riches, or (2) retreat in fear to corners of isolation and parochialism which would not promote understanding, compassion and peace among the different religions and cultures of our world, nor would it prepare the students in our university for leadership in the religiously and culturally diverse workforce into which we will send them upon graduation. We chose to grasp a vision of interfaith and interreligious enrichment even as it presented challenges to old ways of doing and being religious communities on campus.

Proselytizing in Interfaith Community

¹⁶ Kate McCarthy, "Pluralist Family Values: Domestic Strategies for Living With Religious Difference, *Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 612, (Jul. 2007), 196.

¹⁷ The image of the tree with the trunk representing the common root out of which springs all the different religious traditions and spiritualities became the new logo for the Interfaith Chapel after we had completed this process of creating our policies of affiliation.

In the course of preparing the policies document, we engaged in considerable discussion about the University's non-proselytizing requirement. For a number of years, the religious groups affiliating with the chapel had abided by a statement entitled "Communal Expectations for Religious Life" in which religious communities at the chapel agree to cultivate interreligious understanding by facilitating interreligious exploration and learning among students. The Communal Expectations document states clearly, "Active efforts to convert or proselytize have no place in such a setting."

As we worked on the new policies document, members of actively proselytizing religious communities were part of the discussion and they pushed us to be more specific about what constitutes prohibited proselytizing on the university campus. The groups involved were Cru, an Evangelical Christian parachurch organization, Chabad, the Hasidic Jewish organization that actively proselytizes among Jews, and, to a lesser extent, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. All of these groups agreed that they were willing to curb their typical proselytizing practices in order to be affiliated with the Interfaith Chapel. They were willing to sacrifice certain proselytizing activities for the access to students, the recognition and status they would have as affiliated religious organizations, and the financial support they would receive from the chapel as affiliated religious groups.

Basically, the discussion on proselytizing led to an agreement that religious or spiritual group leaders and chaplains are not free to approach students on the campus to discuss religion or spirituality. They must wait for students to seek them out. They are permitted to have tables at student expos and activities fairs but must wait for students to approach them rather than their taking the initiative to approach students. The university regulates soliciting and flyering in dormitories and stipulates where flyers and notices of events and meetings can be posted on campus. Only recognized student groups can post flyers, and in the chapel, only affiliated religious groups may post notices. We require that all religious groups be clear about who they are in all their notices and flyers so that students do not inadvertently come to an event sponsored by a religious group not realizing that it is a religious group hosting the event. We wanted to prevent situations of spiritual "bait and switch" activities. We agreed that students may recruit fellow students and may approach their peers to talk about spirituality and/or religion, but cautioned the evangelical groups about not "training" students to become proselytizing agents in the student body. Genuine and spontaneous student conversations are encouraged. Premeditated and intentional attempts to coerce a fellow student into engaging in a religious or spiritual conversation that may not be that student's interest is actively discouraged.

The lengthiest discussion during this phase of our conversations was how to determine where the line is between talking about or sharing with someone about one's religious faith and "proselytizing." Our statement on this subject cautions religious and spiritual group leaders to "avoid any statements that would suggest to a student that they are in some way 'damned' or 'going to hell' or are misguided, or wrong if they do not belong to the leader's religious community." The document encourages students to use "I" statements when sharing about their faith and to avoid judgmental comments about other religious traditions, beliefs, or practices. The document also requires chaplains and religious/spiritual group leaders to exercise caution when working with students who express an interest in conversion to that leader's religious tradition, particularly if the student has been a member of a different religious tradition prior to entering college. Our policy encourages chaplains and religious leaders to encourage the student to speak with a religious leader in their home faith tradition

prior to making the decision to convert and to be sensitive to family dynamics and other social pressures that may be part of a student's decision to convert.

While we are clear that college students are absolutely free to make their own decisions about religious or spiritual affiliation during their college careers, we also tried to build in safeguards to ensure that students make an informed and appropriate decision, particularly when the conversion might be something that would cause significant familial consternation. In suggesting caution and collaborative consultation among the religious/spiritual leaders and chaplains, we instantiated in our chapel policies a principle declared by a consortium of Christian churches worldwide in a statement issued in January 2011, prepared by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance, which cautioned Christians who engage with people of other world religious traditions:

Ensuring Personal Discernment: Christians are to acknowledge that changing one's religion is a decisive step that must be accompanied by sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom.¹⁸

In a college setting, where we intend to foster intentional interfaith community, this policy of caution and collaboration when students express interest in converting from one tradition to another is a way to be sure that the student is acting out of full personal freedom. And while the principle enunciated above was issued by an Ecumenical Christian organization, we applied it broadly to all the religious groups that affiliate with the Interfaith Chapel.

In the interfaith movement, the agreement not to proselytize is fundamental to any dialogue process. In the guidelines for interfaith dialogue promulgated by the World Council of Churches in 1979, an underlying assumption in all the suggestions for how to engage in dialogue is that the different parties to the dialogue will listen to one another with respect and that all parties to the dialogue are free to "define themselves." The WCC guidelines state unequivocally, "One of the functions of dialogue is to allow participants to describe and witness to their faith in their own terms."¹⁹ As we wrote the document by which we would live out the intentional interfaith community that is the Interfaith Chapel, it was important to clarify the parameters of the agreement not to proselytize, trying to leave all groups with the freedom to exercise their religion as they see fit, and to share their religion with others while protecting students who might be vulnerable from subtle, manipulative tactics that might compromise their ability to exercise their own full religious freedom.

Interfaith and Interreligious Studies is particularly well suited to explore the dynamics of the tensions that arise around proselytization when groups and individuals of different religious traditions encounter one another. While a comparative religion approach would note that Christianity and Islam, for example, are both religions that proselytize, the Interfaith and

¹⁸ World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, World Evangelical Council, *Christian Witness is a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world>, Accessed 10/25/2013.

¹⁹ World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, 02/10/2010, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/guidelines-on-dialogue-with-people-of-living-faiths-and-ideologies>, accessed 10/25/2013.

Interreligious Studies scholar will probe deeply into what the encounter between those religious traditions and others looks like in the real world, and how those traditions manage to engage in interfaith/interreligious dialogue with integrity without completely abrogating that religious heritage of proselytization and evangelization. What texts do members of these traditions turn to when determining how to engage people of other religious traditions? What kinds of “dialogue” do these proselytizing traditions find most beneficial, and what poses the most difficulty? Indeed, the discipline of Interreligious and Interfaith Studies is uniquely poised to tackle the issue of proselytizing as such activity has historically been the primary reason for many religious groups to eschew interfaith or interreligious encounter. There has long been an assumption within evangelical religious circles that interfaith or interreligious dialogue is anathema because of its restriction on proselytizing.

In our discussion of the non-proselytizing requirement, we had a lively conversation about an encounter between members of the Cru organization and a Jewish student who had accompanied a friend to a Cru event. That Jewish student asked the leader of the Cru event some questions after the discussion was concluded and found herself being in “dialogue” for 90 minutes during which time the Cru leader encouraged the student to accept Jesus and to visualize Jesus accompanying her around campus. The Jewish student was traumatized by that encounter, including the promise by the Cru leader to pray for the student. The Jewish student did not want to be prayed for and felt threatened by leader’s offer of prayer. After much conversation among the chaplains and religious leaders, it became clear that the Cru leader was not sensitive to the history of Christian anti-Judaism and its residual effects on Jewish students. She simply did not understand how viscerally a Jewish student might recoil at being pressured to visualize Jesus. In the course of our dialogue about this incident, a dialogue that included representatives from Hillel and Chabad and a variety of Christian leaders, we explored the issue of Christian privilege.

The Dynamics of Privilege

Notwithstanding the recent Pew Forum statistics, showing the steep decline in participation and affiliation with traditional, historic Protestant denominations and a significant increase in non-Christian religions in the American population as well as the significant rise in the percentage of the population who declare no religious affiliation, it is still the case that the United States continues to be a predominantly “Christian” nation. Those of religions other than Christianity continue to feel as though they are the minority, and their religious rituals, festivals, practices, and mores may or may not be reflected in popular culture. American Jews have certainly become more integrated into American culture in the past fifty years, and “interfaith” engagement has included dialogue and engagement between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews since the post-World War II period.

In our Interfaith Chapel conversations regarding the new policies document, the Protestant, Catholic, and Hillel Jewish communities were the three original “Covenant” communities on the campus, and they initially resisted the process of creating a new model for affiliation with the chapel out of fear of loss of that privileged status. This resistance to making room for the diversity of religions now a part of our campus community was an echo of the same kind of resistance and fear of the religious “other” that fueled anti-Semitism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the anti-Catholic hostilities that were part and parcel of our American religious life in the early 20th century, and the Islamophobia that infects our culture today. Even as interfaith and interreligious dialogue has exploded in our post 9/11 context,

“Christian privilege” has continued to be a factor impacting the dialogue process, particularly in cases where the Christians involved are not conscious of the extent of their privilege in our society. That Christians come to any interfaith or interreligious encounter in this country from a position of strength and greater power is a reality that some Christians are reluctant to acknowledge.

In a recent study conducted by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) between 2010 and 2012, the dynamics of Christian privilege were obliquely addressed as the ATS schools began to wrestle with what additions needed to be made to theological education of Christian clergy to better equip them for ministry in a religiously diverse society. The fact of religious diversity is undeniable. ATS recognized that clergy serving congregations in this religiously diverse society needed to achieve a minimal degree of world religions literacy and some training in interfaith and interreligious dialogue. For the purposes of that study, the theological framework for considering the issue of doing Christian ministry in a multi-religious world was the concept of hospitality, a Christian theological virtue that all denominations within the tradition could share, even as they differed theologically in significant ways with respect to how they think theologically about religious pluralism.²⁰ The ATS researchers noted, however, that even the concept of hospitality might imply Christian privilege and a hierarchy with Christianity on top. Ultimately the ATS study adopted that virtue of hospitality as its lens for examining what was needed in theological education of Christian clergy because, “offering hospitality without concern for gaining advantage is a hallmark of the biblical practice.”²¹ It is also a virtue that is shared by all the Abrahamic traditions and so can serve as a foundational concept out of which all three traditions can manage their interactions. It can be tricky to determine in any given situation who is guest and who is host, but at least the concept of hospitality, an open and embracing and welcoming attitude to the “stranger,” provides an affirming and positive start to interfaith/interreligious engagement. If applied with some degree of humility, it can go a long way towards diminishing the power imbalance between the majority-privileged religion and its dialogue partners.

In our context the issue of Christian privilege came up in a variety of subtle ways. Something as simple as what is the appropriate title for campus religious leaders became a study in the effect of Christian privilege on the campus religious climate. Typically, campus religious leaders are called “chaplains,” which is a peculiarly Christian term. It is also a term that connotes someone with a particular set of credentials, usually including graduate theological education and formal endorsement and “ordination” by a recognized religious body. The Christian chaplains were loath to extend the label “chaplain” to religious leaders from other traditions, and even to Christian religious leaders from the parachurch organizations like Cru and InterVarsity, because they had not had the same level of theological and pastoral training. Of course, not all traditions train their religious leaders in the way that Christians train their clergy or Jews train their rabbis. By and large, rabbis in the United States have become comfortable with the term “chaplain” when they are serving in prisons, hospitals, and universities, even though it is not a term that is indigenous to their tradition. Jewish rabbinical training in the Reform and Conservative movements is very similar to Christian Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy training, so the term chaplain seemed to work fine for those groups, all of whom at the University of Rochester made up the original Covenant partners. As we prepared to extend the “privileges” of chaplaincy to religious or spiritual leaders who did not have the same kind of training, those privileged chaplains balked. It took

²⁰ Graham, 2-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

some time for them to become comfortable with the concept that other religious traditions must be free to determine who their religious leaders are and how they are prepared for that leadership. The conversations about what training is required before one can be considered a “chaplain” on campus illustrated the assumptions that Christians bring to an interfaith encounter and the extent to which these Christians, as the privileged religious group in this society, simply assume that the way they do things is the way all other religious groups should function.

The minority religious groups did not care much about whether they could hold the title “chaplain,” but they did care about being eligible for the privileges the university would extend to a person with that title. As they have had to function in the university system, the minority religious group leaders have learned that the title chaplain does have meaning outside the chapel, so they embrace the term even though it is not a term that has meaning within their own religious traditions. Christian privilege continues to be present even as we implement these new policies. Ultimately, all religious leaders on campus who abide by the new policies document are eligible for the “chaplain” title. Most have chosen to use it when securing a university ID, because it confers status and privileges to them that they want in order to serve their constituency on campus.

Other indicia of privilege during our discussions included who gets space in the Interfaith Chapel building, how conflicts are handled when several religious groups are competing for the same space for worship and other activities, and how money is allocated to the religious groups serving the chapel. Ultimately, the original, “privileged” Covenanting partners did not lose their privilege, as we drafted the statement to distinguish between those communities that had part-time chaplaincies and those that had full time chaplains serving their communities. Unfortunately, the outcome of that compromise leaves the smaller, minority communities with fewer financial resources, less space in the building, and lower priority when conflicts arise with respect to reserving space. In the Interfaith Chapel, Christianity and Reform/Conservative Judaism are the privileged groups. Their worship needs take precedence over others, and they receive more financial resources from the University towards their activities. They also serve more students than the minority religious groups. Over time, as the minority religious groups grow, it is our hope that the resources we have available to support their programs will also grow.

For the academic discipline of interreligious and interfaith studies, the issue of privilege is woven into the enterprise. Wherever an interfaith or interreligious encounter takes place, there will be one religious tradition that is privileged in that encounter. In the United States, Canada, and Europe, Christianity would carry the privilege. In Saudi Arabia, Islam would be the privileged group. In Israel, Judaism carries the privilege. The dynamics of how the privileged group interacts with and offers hospitality to the minority religious groups is fodder for academic scrutiny. Privilege is culturally contextual, and the study of how that privilege is managed in any given context is integral to the interfaith/interreligious study of the phenomenon of the interaction.

In our context, the privileged groups did not actually give up any of the privileges they already enjoyed in terms of resources like finances and space. They merely opened the door for the minority groups to join them in enjoying those privileges. They did, however, have to compromise and let go of some of their preconceived assumptions about issues like religious leadership and how and where it is appropriate to share their religious faith with people who do not share that faith. The compromises they did manage to work out are slowly transforming

how the various religious groups see themselves in relation to the other religious groups, and that impacts how they perceive their own faith traditions as they confront other faith traditions. This is the very essence of interfaith and interreligious studies.

Conclusion

Interfaith and Interreligious Studies is an emerging discipline that bridges the existing academic disciplines of comparative religion and comparative theology through its unique focus on how different religious groups actually engage and interact with one another in the real world. The ways of knowing that inform this discipline include cultural/linguistic, intellectual knowledge and study, and also participatory forms of engagement and learning, such as prayer, meditation, chanting, dance, religious rituals, feasts and fasts and food, and engagement in the larger world around common concerns and social issues. The process of drafting the University of Rochester's Policies of Affiliation with the Interfaith Chapel was a microcosm of the way in which the faith traditions of the world are engaging one another in the larger American context and even globally. The issues of proselytization, privilege, limited resources that must be shared, religious leadership and its role in the culture, and the encounter of the sacred and the secular are all the stuff of interfaith and interreligious study and dialogue.

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