

Processing Experiences Within an Academic Framework: A Challenge for Interfaith Education

By Elena Dini

There are clearly many ways to address the issue of interfaith dialogue in an academic context. A first distinction may easily come when tackling the question: Why do we care about interfaith dialogue? The answers scholars, instructors, and students come up with may be very different. Among the most common is the consideration that our world is getting more and more diverse, and people are living in multireligious environments. We should therefore learn how to live together at our best and invest in social cohesion. Dialogue, then, has a very practical and communitarian aim. However, this is not the only answer one can give.

Dialogue is often praised for its individual transformative power. Archbishop Rowan Williams, commenting on the Building Bridges Seminars, a well known experience of dialogue in the academic world, said:

For many a real dialogue about what we specifically believe and the thoughts we have about our faith ought to take second place to discussions concerning the practical tasks we can share [...] But this dialogue has been conceived rather differently. Christians are Christians and Muslims are Muslims because they care about truth, and because they believe that truth alone gives life.¹

So sometimes, dialogue can be sought just for the sake of dialogue itself.

We are thus faced with a field approached with different aims, at different stages of personal growth, and in different ways. Whether we agree with the first reasoning or with the second or with both, it is clear that this “interfaith dialogue” people are interested in learning or that they feel may be relevant for their future activities is primarily concerned with concrete and necessary encounters with an “other” from a different faith community. It is therefore imperative to discuss **what can be taught to these people and how**.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the presence of explicit occasions that seminaries, universities, or educative institutions actively offer for interfaith education within and outside the curriculum. Three main pedagogic choices will be introduced: visits to houses of worship, dialogue exchanges in the classroom, and multifaith housing. In this context, two specific case studies will be examined: Hartford Seminary (USA), a seminary which has a clear focus in interfaith dialogue and Islamic studies, and the Summer School of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme (UK), which annually selects an international group of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim emerging religious leaders to be engaged for three weeks in various activities of interfaith dialogue, with a specific focus on Scriptural Reasoning training. These case studies will lastly open the way to reflection on how to help students process their interfaith experiences within an academic framework. How will these encounters, skills and tools coherently become part of a knowledge that is to be assessed and implemented? Is it possible to do so?

In many different academic fields, a common experience has been that of moving from a frontal lecture-style teaching to a more participative learning model. If this is true for scientific topics, it is even more so for a discipline based on human interactions—like interfaith dialogue. The Scarborough mission’s website proposes an interesting model of five approaches to interfaith dialogue:

- Informational: Acquiring of knowledge of the faith partner's religious history, founding, basic beliefs, scriptures, etc.
- Confessional: Allowing the faith partners to speak as a believer for and define themselves in terms of what it means to live as an adherent.
- Experiential: Dialogue with faith partners from within the partner's tradition, worship and ritual - entering into the feelings of one's partner and permitting that person's symbols and stories to guide.
- Relational: Develop friendships with individual persons beyond the "business" of dialogue.
- Practical: Collaborate to promote peace and justice.²

In these five different approaches (which may be integrated in a holistic education), probably only the first one could be addressed without direct contact with the religious other; even then, receiving informational content from a person of the specific faith tradition under observation is definitely a more captivating experience than receiving it from an “outsider” of that religious community.³ This is because there is clearly a difference between learning about the other and being in the presence of the other,⁴ in the same way as there is a difference between learning about interfaith dialogue and practicing it. Interfaith education is not only about learning contents, but also about learning skills and virtues. In order to do so, practical experience is needed. Among the different activities or experiences that may be proposed in an academic or more broadly learning setting, three have been chosen here for a deeper discussion.

The first one is the **visit to houses of worship of other faith traditions**. In many interfaith dialogue courses, this is an option, sometimes a requirement. Students are expected to visit the house of worship of another tradition, and that may happen in two ways: either they are invited to do it on their own, or they are called to do it with their class. There are clearly pros and cons to each of the two alternatives. For example, James Redington, describing the course on Interreligious Dialogue at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, tells us that he prefers that these visits “be a ‘real-life’ experience, and thus involve spontaneity both on the student’s part and the religious center’s, rather than being too pre-arranged or ordered to formal dialogue.”⁵ Wesley Ariarajah, teaching at Drew University School of Theology, has a different approach. Part of his course on “The Challenges of World Religions to Christian Faith and Practice” are two Friday evening visits. The group attends a program in two selected houses of worship, which consists generally in a short introduction by some leaders of the community, attendance at the worship, and finally convivial time with the community. It seems clear that the class benefits from the organization of the event and also from the chance to discuss and unpack this experience together during the following class meeting.⁶ However, it is interesting to note that the instructor of this particular course also requires an individual semester-long project based on observation, interviews, and analysis of a specific religious community to be selected by the student. This way, the student may have both the chance of interacting personally with another faith community and benefiting from the class discussion about their common experience.

In the two cases I have studied more closely, visits to houses of worship are part of the experiences students are exposed to. At Hartford Seminary, there were at least four courses in 2013-14 that offered this opportunity: “Dialogue in a World of Difference,” “Building Abrahamic Partnerships,” “Christian-Muslim Relations in Arabia: Ibadi Islam and Interfaith Theology in the Sultanate of Oman” (which takes place in Oman), and “Faith in the Neighborhood: An Introduction to America’s Religious Diversity.” For the sake of space we will just highlight some points related to the first two courses. For the “Dialogue in a World of Difference” course, which is required for all Master’s degree candidates, students must

submit a comparative writing assignment. They have to attend a service in their own faith community and in at least another one, observe from a sociological point of view the way it is run, and then write down their reflections according to a set of guidelines provided during the course. Even if this kind of engagement does not require a personal connection with the community, there are two extremely interesting outcomes: first of all, a better familiarization with that faith tradition, and second, the development of a critical eye which should be applied not only to the hosting community, but also to one's own community for the sake of this writing assignment.⁷ Sometimes it is difficult to realize how double standards are used in one's own assessments, and this exercise will likely highlight some of these unconscious prejudices.

In the Building Abrahamic Partnerships, an intensive 8-day course designed as a Jewish-Christian-Muslim training program, visits to the houses of worship take place during the program so that the whole group is attending together. Students usually go to a mosque on Friday, a synagogue on Saturday, and a church on Sunday. During the lunch break, after having attended the worship, the group shares reactions to the experience. Yehezkel Landau, the instructor of the course, underlines the importance of taking into consideration negative feelings, fears, and suspicions students may encounter during this activity. He states: "These are the moments, holistically engaging head and heart and gut, where I believe BAP [Building Abrahamic Partnerships] is most interpersonally genuine, spiritually and ethically concrete, and ultimately transformative in positive ways."⁸ The moment of direct contact not only with a person from another faith community, but with the more institutional setting of that faith tradition, may provoke feelings that must be taken into consideration and processed in order to be transformed from potential obstacles into elements of strength.

The Summer School of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme (CIP) also proposes visits to houses of worship. The Assistant Director and the Recruitment Officer of the Summer School describe the goal of that activity as the chance for the international student body to familiarize with the UK religious panorama and to have an experience that for many students is completely new. Furthermore, they add: "Using the Scriptural Reasoning language, the Summer School is a 'tent' and the tent is fantastic but you cannot live in a tent forever. And sometimes you need brick houses so going to the places of worship is visiting those brick houses."⁹ An alum comments on his visit to a place of worship of another faith tradition:

I felt it allowed me an intimate insight into their 'sacred spaces' and it was here that I felt my historical and theological kinship most strongly [...] It also allowed me to view those rituals, traditions, liturgical practices, and doctrines I found 'strange' and 'silly' from a different angle where they were intricately tied to a community bound in sacred relationship with God.¹⁰

From these comments, it may be argued that taking time to enter someone else's world is a valuable experience. Students of different faith traditions may come together in the same classroom and have valuable exchanges, which may turn into friendship. However, there is always the need in an academic learning process to connect that single person to his/her larger community.

Another important factor in interfaith education is the way **dialogue exchanges happen in the classroom or in activities in which the group is invited to share time with members of another religious community**. The quality of interaction seems to be an extremely relevant issue, able to make the whole relational experience a success or a failure (though not the informational one, as the case described by Robert Hunt from Perkins School of Theology shows¹¹). Considering the option of a multireligious student body (which is not always the case), the class interactions become a priority to be facilitated and monitored by the instructor/s. Diane Swords is a long-term facilitator of Intergroup

Dialogue courses (a tool designed in the 1980s to “engage students in critical conversations about race and equality”)¹², and in her remarks about the interfaith course she co-facilitated at Syracuse University on “Dialogue in Action: Faith, Conflict and Community,” three main points may be identified: a) the importance of communication skills, b) the need to create a safe space where all participants may feel comfortable to talk and share, and c) the active choice to support students in creating personal relationships.¹³ These three points may be easily seen in connection: good communication skills pave the way to the creation of a safe environment where people may feel open to develop relationships based on the acquired bonds of trust.

Eboo Patel, April Kunze, and Noah Silverman from the Interfaith Youth Core also insist on the importance of using communication skills to learn about the other in dialogue. The authors discuss the Interfaith Youth Core’s choice of using storytelling as a key methodology for interfaith youth work. Their argument is that:

[S]torytelling provides a bridge for overcoming some of the major obstacles frequently encountered in interfaith dialogue by opening the possibility for a different kind of conversation. [...] Personal storytelling moves the encounter from competing notions of ‘Truth’ to varied human experiences of life.¹⁴

However, we should not imagine that every dialogue session is easy: some difficult moments or conflicts may clearly arise. What do we do then? How do we consider these moments, and how do we react? Jeffrey Kurtz and Mark Orten have come to an interesting theory about what they call “rhetorical rupture”: “a rhetorical rupture may be understood as a pivotal moment when the conventions of rhetoric [...] inject conflict into a discourse community.”¹⁵ These occasions of conflict are described by the authors as “teachable moments,”¹⁶ and, I would add, probably among the best teachable moments if the instructor is able to incline the group toward a positive resolution. If a conflict in what should be a safe space arises and is managed, this experience will likely be treasured in the minds and hearts of the participants, who will know that it is possible to come to a common ground even in the face of conflict.

Professor Hadsell, President of Hartford Seminary, is one of the three instructors of the Dialogue in a World of Difference course. Together with two professors who used to teach this course with her, she stresses the importance of four points that I find particularly relevant: a) the choice of organizing small group discussions during the sessions that allows students “to practice theories they learned in class and gain experience in dialogically interacting with people from different traditions and cultures,”¹⁷ b) a set of general guidelines which are the ground on which to build positive class interactions like respect, appreciative listening of the other, and active sharing of one’s own beliefs and ideas¹⁸, c) the possibility of debriefing in plenary what happens in the small group discussions, and finally d) the added value of having an interfaith team of instructors which may model a positive interfaith interaction.

In the CIP Summer School, the situation may be somewhat different. Students are usually exposed to a wide range of diverse interfaith activities. The key commitment is to the Scriptural Reasoning session, which takes place every morning (Saturdays and Sundays excluded). During the rest of the day, however, many other activities take place: group discussions revolving around a specific topic, master classes or interactive practical workshops with an expert in interfaith dialogue, and “buddy groups,” which are very small informal groups with at least a Jewish, a Christian, and a Muslim student which are assigned for the whole time of the Summer School (this is the space where students can choose every day what topics to discuss with no fixed agenda). Talking about the kind of interactions experienced during the SR sessions, the Recruitment Officer underlines a main difference

from the usual kind of interfaith exchanges: “In SR there is no immediate pressure to apply the dialogue to real life. Most times it comes as part of the conversation but the conversation can focus on only scriptures.”¹⁹ When asked to describe the quality of interactions and “class” discussions during the Summer School, the alumni/ae interviewed for this paper seem to identify the opportunity to cohabitate as the main factor which made the difference in their interactions. An alumna from the United States comments that: “I think the CIP interactions were much more transformative, intense than previous experiences because of our living arrangements.”²⁰

These reflections pave the way to the last element in interfaith education that this paper is going to tackle: **multifaith housing, i.e.** the chance for members of different faith groups to live together, which can involve anything from spending time outside the classroom, to sharing free time, to sitting together for meals, to engaging in totally informal discussion, to establishing common ground for everyday house management issues. Not many examples have been studied regarding the impact multifaith housing has on interfaith learning. However, if we rely on students’ reflections and comments, it seems clear that this experience is probably one of the most formative and transformative ones while probably having, at the same time, the lowest degree of traditional academic value or of conscious reflection.

Hartford Seminary has made the explicit choice of proposing to students residing on campus to experience multifaith housing. President Hadsell comments:

One of the concrete outcomes is that people in the housing learn to deal with conflicts and that conflict can be about food, hours, etc. Some of these issues may have to do with religion and some others don’t. My guess is that for many people the first thing they experience is the difference with religion, particularly in terms of time for prayer and kind of food, and then, as time goes on, religion just becomes part of who that person is.²¹

Another interesting element she highlights is the transformative power of these everyday experiences; people may be worried at the very beginning about lacking respect for each other or crossing boundaries they shouldn’t cross. But, as Hadsell states, taking the example of Nigerian students:

Our Nigerian students might go back to extremely conflictual situations between Muslims and Christians in Northern Nigeria but, for the rest of their lives, they’re going to carry within themselves the knowledge of the friendship they have made with Muslims or Christians. They can never demonize the other in the same way again.²²

This same thought is echoed by a Nigerian alum of the CIP Summer School: “Living together during those weeks has broken all stereotypes; I now have more Muslim friends. I have even co-founded an organisation with Muslims back home.”²³ As already observed, the quality of dialogue exchanges for some of the CIP Summer School alumni/ae is considered to be the result of living together, since it gives the chance to build deeper relationships and bonds of trust. Another student shares:

Because we had been spending a lot of time together, sharing meals, etc, we had a level of trust which allowed us to begin to share ideas and feelings about contentious and painful issues (most noticeably Israel/ Palestine) in an honest and fairly open way... For example, I ended up discussing attitudes to contraception with a participant of another religion, which came out of me telling her about my forthcoming wedding.²⁴

The CIP Summer School takes place in an incredibly beautiful setting: Madingley Hall. When I asked the organizers why they chose that location, one of their first answers, though not the only one, was that it was “at some distance from Cambridge so the students can engage with each other without the distraction of being in an urban city center.” Madingley Hall is indeed far enough from the city center to make going out on one’s own every night difficult for an international student. The result is that students come up with activities for their free time together, having thus a chance more to get to know each other better.

The relational and experiential side of interfaith education seems to play a major role in academic settings. The main question one should then ask is: **how do we frame in academic terms what happens in those situations?** In her article on “Engaging Interfaith Studies across the Curriculum: from Niche to Norm,” Cassie Meyer is concerned with how to assess the level of interfaith learning of students. She proposes “relationship-building skills and knowledge that fosters interfaith literacy”²⁵ as the outcomes an instructor should seek. Along the same lines, Rabbi Or Rose from Hebrew College states: “I do think that there are important elements of interreligious education that can and should take place through traditional book learning [...] However, as I said above, these forms of learning are necessary, but insufficient.”²⁶

It may happen that, when interpersonal relationships are at the basis of one’s own learning, the academic content is left behind. It is this author’s belief that this should not be the direction interfaith education should move to. Relational and experiential education need both a basis on which to be built and a framework in which to be analyzed within the academic setting. From a discussion with Professor Hadsell on the issue of when and how to teach contents (theological, scriptural, social, and cultural) in interfaith education, it became clear that, even if one starts with teaching content, there is no clear delimitation between academic knowledge and experience—especially when that happens in a multifaith context where “just being in the same class together is experience and having breaks during which the Muslims go to pray is experience or Ramadan when Muslims are fasting is experience.”²⁷ A parallel may be useful to explain the importance of a basic knowledge of the other’s faith and of interfaith literacy. In a friendship, the people involved usually try to learn more about one another: what kind of food the other one likes, how many brothers and sisters does he/she have, what is the other person’s most joyful or painful memory, and so on. This is because one cares for the other person. The same happens within the context of interfaith relationships. One is not usually called to be an expert in the other’s faith, but a general and basic knowledge is definitely something to be sought. This knowledge, then, is clearly going to be imbued with personal experiences of direct relationships with people from that faith tradition and to become not only something to be found in books, but also through an enriched living knowledge.

Usually when someone is called to serve in a multifaith setting or is engaging in interfaith dialogue, there are three main actions he/she may find useful to perform after an interfaith training: a) talking about the experience: what one lives may be extremely powerful and transformative and one should be trained to convey this experience to other people in order to make it accessible, b) making that experience useful: that means to draw from it clear teachings and not only emotions or feelings, and c) being able to “replicate” the experience. By “replicating” I mean being able to apply skills, practices, and knowledge acquired during the training to new contexts. That requires a deep interiorization of both the material taught during the course and the experience itself.

How is it then possible for the instructor to facilitate this process? A viable option is that of finding times and moments for the class and the single individual to debrief what has been read, listened to, and experienced. This can be done either during the class time or as part of the assignments of the course. The deepness of the interfaith experience

lived (and this includes the multifaith housing) is not going to be forgotten, and it will clearly remain part of the students' baggage. However, it seems more difficult to systematically reflect on such experiences when one is no more living it and is already engaged in another phase of his/her own life. This is why, in order to help students process the interpersonal and interfaith experiences they have had during the course or during the time spent in the training, instructors may consider the options of: a) inviting the students to keep a diary where they can register after every session something that they learned and that can either shed light on a past situation or be useful for a future one, b) elaborating a project with some of their colleagues so that they may have the chance to get to know each other better and to reflect on the practical side of dialogue, and c) inviting the students to submit a reflection not on what they learned from the course but on a specific situation that they will have to face in their communities after the end of the course and how they can apply the wisdom received during the training.

To conclude, the field of interfaith dialogue is still a very young one. But it is also a field which feels the pressure of developing in a short time. How, then, may academia support the endeavors of those who are training and those who want to be trained? This paper has tried to demonstrate the importance of relational and experiential education in this field through the observation of three activities or situations that may foster the development of interfaith knowledge and skills: visits to houses of worship, dialogue exchanges in the classroom, and multifaith housing. Nonetheless, the importance of providing students with relevant content and basic knowledge of other faiths, of history of relations between communities, and of analysis of practices and tools to use in dialogue should not be underestimated. The role of academia seems to be that of providing spaces for the students to experience interfaith dialogue but, even more importantly, of supporting them in processing their experiences and making them able to actively access and replicate them.

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¹ Rowan Williams, “Introducing the Seminar,” in *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together*, ed. Michael Ipgrave (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), xi.

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³ As Prof. Robert Hunt from Perkins School of Theology argues when he describes the choice he made in his course on “World Religions and Christianity” to allow space for lectures by non-Christian religious practitioners. Robert Hunt, “World Religions and Christianity: A Global Perspective in the Context of the Overall Program of Theological Education at Perkins School of Theology,” in *Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue*, eds. David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell (Hartford: Hartford Seminary, 2009), 73.

⁴ Or Rose, “Continuing the Conversation: Pedagogic Principles for Multifaith Education,” *Theological Education*, Vol. 47, N°2 (2013): 62. Rabbi Rose is Co-Director of CIRCLE, a center for interreligious learning and leadership co-sponsored by Hebrew College and Andover Newton Theological School.

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- ⁹ Skype interview done by the author with the Assistant Director and Recruitment Officer of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme Summer School on February 20, 2014.
- ¹⁰ E-mail interview with a CIP Summer School alum done by the author on March 10, 2014.
- ¹¹ Students were required to take part in a series of dialogue meetings with non-Christians from local communities, but a group reported to have met with a Muslim community which did not organize for any real meeting with a group of members. They just arranged for a meeting with an imam that the students described as “closed-minded, largely ignorant of American culture and mysoginist.” Notwithstanding, the students “agreed that they learned a great deal.” Both quotations are from Hunt, “World Religions and Christianity,” 71.
- ¹² Nazia Islam, Tiffany Steinwert, and Diane Swords, “3 Dialogue in Action: Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Interfaith Education,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, Issue 13 (Winter 2014): 4.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.
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- ²¹ Personal interview with President Heidi Hadsell on March 7, 2014.
- ²² Personal interview with President Heidi Hadsell on March 7, 2014.
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- ²⁵ Cassie Meyer, “Engaging Interfaith Studies across the Curriculum: from Niche to Norm,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, Issue 13 (Winter 2014): 73.
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