Public Deliberation in Interfaith Pedagogies:
Interfaith Leaders in the Public Sphere

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This article argues that as the emerging field of interfaith studies defines the skills and knowledge base required for students to become public interfaith leaders, it must include the practice of public deliberation and collaborative problem-solving in its curricula. It begins with a delineation of fundamental questions about the place of religion in the public sphere and ways that these questions surface in interfaith studies classrooms. It then describes in detail a developmental, metacognitive pedagogy for engagement in interreligious deliberation at the first-year level. The article concludes with thoughts on how our students may move beyond dyadic thinking about secular and religious reasoning in public deliberation.

Pressing Pedagogical Questions

The emerging field of interfaith studies is creating pedagogies that prepare students for public interfaith leadership. For the field to have the kind of impact on interreligious dynamics at the local and global level that most engaged professors hope for, it must remain an activist discipline—practical, skills-driven, and action-directed, with (never enough, ever ongoing) interreligious learning and literacy at the core. As professors gather across the United States in workshops and at conferences, they are focusing on defining the interactive skills, interreligious literacy, and experience in community activism that students need to acquire to be effective in religiously diverse settings. Current curricula emphasize dialogue skills, storytelling, and role-playing, *inter alia*, as critical to building interreligious knowledge and empathy. Certainly, both of these are key components in interreligious work. In this paper, however, I will argue that thinking about and practicing public deliberation and collaborative problem-solving in the classroom, by posing and evaluating interreligious dilemmas, is an essential piece of interfaith studies pedagogy.

In focusing on the role of religious perspectives in public deliberation, and in using the classroom as "practice for public life," professors and students enter into a public conversation that has been ongoing, with some intensity, since the 1980s, about how to reconcile religious and/or spiritual worldviews, doctrines, and practices with existing, largely secular, civic engagement models. Jürgen Habermas' influential conception of the public sphere (1962-1989)[1] was predicated on the proposition that "religious convictions emerge in public debate only as opinions and thus have to engage with other (non-religiously informed) opinions in line with agreed-upon, rational discursive rules."[2]

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[1] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

[2] Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, eds., *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 4.

Habermas' particular brand of deliberative democracy was, and remains, based in an intersubjective discursive model of contingent validity in public deliberation. This is why he stresses a "context-bound" common good that is found by rationally reconstructing the communicative assumptions of any civic group regarding shared objectives and social worlds. Such a conditional "common good" necessarily presumes non-foundationalist—what he calls "post-metaphysical"—thinking, based not on absolute truths, but provisional, intersubjective shared needs. However, Habermas still requires citizens to translate their reasoning in informal public debate, religious or not, into secular terms, which he sees as *the* common language of all, for the purposes of formal processes of legislation. Habermas' early approach was like Rawlsian political liberalism in its policing of "unreasonable" citizens and its restriction of public deliberation to "constitutional essentials" and mutually amenable "overlapping consensus." His later work has moved to considering a contained role for religion in the social and moral domains of public deliberation.

Around the same time that Habermas wrote *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Richard John Neuhaus' equally influential book, *The Naked Public Square*,[3] argued that excising religious arguments and convictions from politics in America 1) circumscribes the moral bases of public laws, 2) suggests that secular reason and the public laws it produces are value-neutral, and 3) opens the way for a secular monopoly on public ethics and laws. Such a monopoly, according to Neuhaus, does not reflect the worldviews of *all* the people and is therefore anti-democratic. He even uses the term "secular totalitarianism." While Neuhaus may appear to encourage agonistic democratic practices, such as eschewing rationalism in favor of representing excluded people and viewpoints, he is instead only claiming the normative center for himself, defining the "American experiment" as "rooted in explicitly Judeo-Christian assumptions about natural rights and man's right relationship to government."[4]

These broad political questions may seem far afield from interfaith classroom pedagogies, but they are not; they are critical to training students for interfaith work. In practicing public deliberation on interfaith questions, in teaching critical thinking skills in tandem with pluralistic interfaith commitments and convictions, professors and students confront very practical questions, such as: "How can a public proposal based on a point of faith, or a religiously informed understanding of 'human nature,' or the existence of a deity, hold sway in public deliberative settings?" There is a great deal of literature on public deliberation and what constitute "acceptable reasons," shared logic, and falsifiable propositions, as well as the role of guiding beliefs and values, emotions, trade-offs, tension, empathy, and tolerance.[5] The question in a pluralistic civic (interfaith) context is: "What reasons, logics, and 'warrants' *are compelling* and why?" Yet right behind this question are those regarding the relative worth of reason, emotion, protest, being different, exclusive "truths," changing one's mind or identity, and power. These questions surface in the classroom and demand attention. Asking these questions and practicing ways to answer them in deliberative discussions is essential training for students of interfaith studies.

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[3] Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).

[4] Daniel Davis, "The Naked Public Square: A Prophetic and Invaluable Read," August 1, 2015, http://townhall.com/columnists/danieldavis/2015/08/01/the-naked-public-square-a-book-review-30-years-later-n2033159/print.

[5] Sara A. M. Drury, Derek Andre, Seton Goddard, and Jeremy Wentzel, "Assessing Deliberative Pedagogy: Using a Learning Outcomes Rubric to Assess Tradeoffs and Tensions," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 12, no. 1 (2016), available at: http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol12/iss1/art5; Brian E. Adams, "Reason-Giving In Deliberative Forums," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 10, no. 2 (2014), available at: http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol10/iss2/art6.

Why? Because the secular construal of the public sphere would seem, by definition, to deny the credibility of (inter)faith-driven public deliberation in civic affairs. Indeed, it arguably forces religious citizens into an agonistic mode. Teaching our students to dive in and experience the possibilities and pitfalls of public deliberation based on religious propositions is extremely important. Religious arguments are used in the political and cultural arenas all the time, and are often culturally chauvinistic in their assumption of their own normativity, and thus can be leveraged in coercive and/or exclusivist ways. On the other hand, no one has any tangible authority to unilaterally excise religious or spiritual principles and commitments that people, notwithstanding academic theories of secularization, continue to bring to the civic table. Students of all religious and non-religious tendencies must learn to discern what principles, propositions, and warrants for action are compelling, *in practice*, in a pluralist world and why. What turns out to be compelling in practice may include agonistic strategies that forego being reasonable, universalist, or even pluralist. Typically, students see such agonistic modes as "disrespectful," disruptive contributions. Yet, such strategies can be viable forms of protest in the interest of emancipation from now-power-drenched regimes of standardized public reasoning and participation—something students *do* intuit deeply in their own sense of inadequacy in the classroom. We must help our students understand and engage with any of these possible responses to a secularized public sphere, *and what their own vision and goals are, in response.*

So, how do we teach students how to do this? In the following pages, I will delineate a pedagogy for first-year undergraduates that is metacognitive. Throughout the course this pedagogy maintains instructor-led, introspective student reflection on classroom dynamics, including the roles students play and the impact of their words and ideas. The goal is to show students how to become more self-reflexive, and to explore their own intersectional identities, as they practice moving between storytelling, dialogue, argumentation, deliberation, and advocacy. Essential to this pedagogy is continual exploration, by students and professor alike, of the hard and fast boundary between critical reasoning and emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual reasoning. The place of religion in the public sphere is an open and recurring question.

An intentionally *developmental* pedagogical model that nurtures students' self-authorship is essential. If students are to become the kind of citizen, activist, leader, or peacemaker who can mediate diverse religious worldviews, they must be given ample opportunities—in our classrooms and beyond—to learn to know themselves and to be able to balance self and community effectively and constructively. They must understand who they are, what is at stake for them in the public domain, and what the normative options are for engagement in social and political deliberations regardless of how they choose to engage.

This emphasis is important because the "finding" of political common ground entails knowing the ground on which one stands first. In the case of interreligious deliberation it also requires knowing that there are irreconcilable propositions in many religious traditions and that there is almost always no "perfect" solution in a pluralistic world that will meet all participants' commitments. Students must learn that "common ground" may *not* reflect principles and practices that they hold most sacred. How do 18-year-old students get to this point, many of whom are not yet sure what their own commitments are, and who are struggling to absorb unfamiliar perspectives that appear to negate what they have understood to be, or have been taught are, "right" or "safe" or "acceptable"? Staying open and "soft" is frightening at their developmental stage.

A Developmental Metacognitive Pedagogy of Deliberative Interfaith Engagement

In several classes over the last four years, I have been teaching interfaith literacy and dialogue together with general education skills of (academic) citizenship, as the latter have been defined by the Bridgewater College faculty. Providing students with videos, texts, and opportunities to interact with members of multiple religious, secular humanist, and agnostic/atheistic traditions, I have asked them to process what they hear and see through active listening, perspective-taking, role-playing, reframing, and—most recently and germane to this paper—*public deliberation and civil discourse*. The following delineation of pedagogical principles and methods comes out of three years of teaching a first-year, first-semester seminar.

The title of the seminar for the first two years was "Sons and Daughters of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah: Historical and Current Encounters between Jews, Christians, and Muslims." Historical and contemporary texts voicing multiple perspectives from within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were used in the seminar to bring alive important moments of encounter, opposition, and interdependence in the history of the three Abrahamic faiths. Last year, I changed the title and content to "Spiritual Autobiographies: Many Paths, One World." This simplified the focus of the course for first-year students, removing the need for extensive historicizing, which they found difficult and distracting, and allowed students to better focus on interreligious content, all the while maintaining the perspectival foundation that enables students to see diversity *within*, as well as *across*, religious traditions.

The goals have always been to encourage self-reflexivity and self-authorship in incoming students while inculcating basic skills of critical thinking and authentic engagement across religious difference. The media through which these goals have been pursued in the last year are in-class peer exercises, YouTube testimonials, TED talks, spiritual autobiographies, interfaith dialogues with local student groups, and religion overview "cheat sheets." This last is the only tool that describes the basic tenets, practices, etc. of religious traditions from an etic perspective; the majority of course material reflects the course's primary focus on "lived" religious experience rather than institutionally or academically defined "religions."

Through exposure to these media, students may begin to see how complex the thought-worlds of their peers and a range of religious Others are. Ultimately, the course aims to move incoming students from expressing tolerance (which they correctly see as a virtue of their generation, relative to prior generations) to a) exploring their own and others' underlying assumptions; b) evaluating the implications of competing worldviews; c) making decisions collaboratively; and d) authoring their own social and political activism (the sort of activism that they have before typically viewed as disrespectful, alienating, and authoritarian).

How is all this attempted? Four collective processes are integral (metacognition; self-reflexivity/intersectionality; balancing mind and heart; and responsible communal deliberative work):

1. Shared emphasis on **metacognition**; collaborative teaching and learning built on the premise that students learn better when a) they are fully aware of why they are doing what

they are doing, b) are given the opportunity to identify the assumptions behind what they are being asked to do, *and* c) *are encouraged to evaluate those assumptions (decide if they agree with them or not)*;

2. Student (and professor) empowerment through teaching **self-reflexivity** and awareness of the **intersectionality** (intersectional identities) that defines and motivates everyone (including the professor);

3. Keeping front and center the question of the relationship of **mind and heart**, the calibration of critical thinking skills, perspective-taking, taking to heart the ideas and concerns of multiple Others, and never forgetting the social and cultural implications of propositions, not just thinking abstractly about metaphysical truths, but also asking what the implications are and *for whom* (lived truths); and

4. Understanding and responsibly leveraging one's own identities and roles in **responsible communal deliberative work,** always advocating that all values are heard and considered, no matter how contradictory, emotional, or oppositional those values may at first appear to students.

These processes attempt to establish an intersubjective, discursive model of validity in problem-solving based on the experiences, perspectives, and consequent assumptions of individuals in the classroom, and not on disembodied, impersonal debates of "right" or "wrong" conclusions or solutions. These processes enable collaborative data collection and problem-solving, the establishment of shared objectives, and a sense of common care and common cause. Only then can arguments and solutions be deemed "valid" in this instance for this group.

Thus, before any dialogue or deliberation takes place at all, I ensure that students have a strong metacognitive understanding of, and opportunities to evaluate, the goals and processes of the course. The syllabus is their first close-reading assignment and it begins by specifying the course's rationale and goals explicitly:

> In this course, we will focus on skills needed to engage in productive civil discourse about spiritual commitments through a) consideration of our own and others' spiritual and non-spiritual journeys and identities, b) active listening and perspective-taking exercises, c) public reasoning about public religiously relevant dilemmas, and d) imagining how authentic encounters with religious Others can create a culture of peaceful pluralism.

This short paragraph introduces some of the key terms/skills of the course (*civil discourse, active listening, perspective-taking, public reasoning, religious Others*), which we then discuss in detail in class. It is followed by a commitment (that everyone makes) to "make our classroom a safe/brave space so that we can practice relating well to Others in the 'real' world by developing good relationships in the classroom and in interviews and dialogues we engage in outside the classroom." (To this end, collaborative guidelines are defined by the class in the first meeting.)

The first two weeks of sessions are then dedicated to defining and evaluating the core concepts, methods, and assumptions of the course and helping students evaluate their relationship to them. Here are the first several classes as they appear on the syllabus:

1.	Go over syllabus. Define rationales and goals of Bridgewater's first-year seminar and general education curriculum. *In-class group work: Collaborative guidelines for class discussions/peer exchanges*

2.	Define "public/civil discourse and public deliberation."
	In-class discussion of assumptions underlying ideals of civil discourse and public deliberation.

3.	What are the values reflected in the first-year seminar, general education at Bridgewater, and public deliberation and what do you think of them? Are they compelling to you? Why or why not? *In-class discussion.*

4.	*Techniques*: Storytelling, reflective structured dialogue, active listening, reframing (paraphrasing), open-ended questions. *In-class definitions and rationales, and evaluation/discussion.* Reading: Patel, Kunze, Silverman, "Storytelling as Key Methodology in Interfaith Youth Work"

5.	*Exploration of intersectionality: In-class reflective structured dialogue on intersectionality.* Reading: Beverly Daniel Tatum, "The Complexity of Identity: 'Who Am I?'"

	To clarify what the content of these discussions entail, I include here the following three discussion handouts and classroom exercises.

Handout on Values of Civil Discourse and Bridgewater's General Education Curriculum

(*as defined by students in class and then given back to them in the next class*)
Blue text indicates overlapping ideals.

Values/Ideals of Civil Discourse
mutual understanding
exposure to new perspectives
acceptance – respect – tolerance – agreement?
analysis of worldviews – exploration of beliefs
participation: sharing their experiences and ideas (opposite of complacency)
emotion – commitment – objectivity?
move outside their comfort zone, beyond what feels "normal"
reflexivity, exploring their own story, assumptions, beliefs, practices
OK to evolve in their ideas, beliefs, and practices
inspiration to further collaborative action in the world
public reasoning
collaborative decision-making more effective for common good than individual genius

Values/Ideals of General Education and the First-Year Seminar
self-authorship
breadth of knowledge
imposed choices, curtailing specialization
developmental model
being "well-rounded" (many abilities/achievements; fully developing all the parts of you)
academic citizenship (active listening, perspective-taking, analysis of options for common good)
intercultural capacity
ethics and civic responsibility
experiential learning

IMAGE 2
Map of Intersectional Identities Exercise

Race/ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical/mental/psychological ability, geographic origin.

Identity Map

I am...
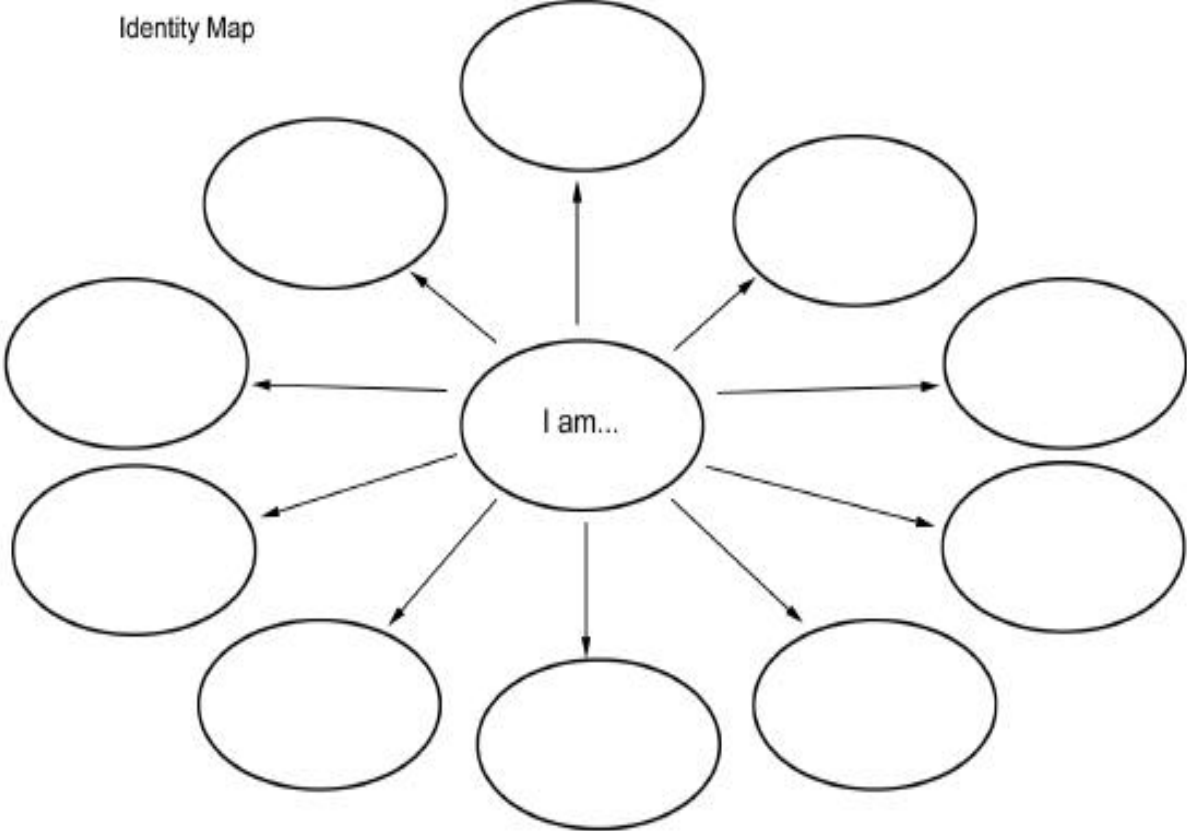
Please rank your identities by how definitive they are of who you see yourself to be.
Please indicate for each if you believe that part of your identity is more socially constructed or more biologically inherent.

IMAGE #3
Walk of Privilege Exercise

Participants stand in a straight line in the middle of an empty room. Some statements might feel too exposing; you don't have to respond to any statement that is uncomfortable. *This exercise is about power and privilege and also about the many different identities that make each of us who s/he is. Your answers will put you in different locations in the room. Power and privilege tend to be invisible to those who are privileged, but sometimes also to those who are not. The point of this exercise is not to make any of us embarrassed about the privileges we have or have not received. It is to make all of us aware that power and privilege are real, not theoretical; they are interpersonal and they will inevitably come into play in our classroom. Being aware will help us relate to each other with understanding and compassion.*

If your ancestors came to the United States by force, take one step back.
If there were more than 50 books in your house growing up, take one step forward.
If you ever felt unsafe because of your sexual orientation, take one step back.
If you believe people have expected *less* of you because of your race, gender, or ethnicity, take one step back.
If you were ever stopped or questioned by the police because of your race, take one step back.
If you have ever felt uncomfortable about a joke directed at your gender, take one step back.
If you can show affection for your partner in public without fear of ridicule/violence, take one step forward.
If you were embarrassed about your clothes or house while growing up, take one step back.
If your parents or guardians attended college, take one step forward.
If you were raised in an area with crime and drug activity, take one step back.
If you have been unsure if you would get time off from work for your religious holidays, take one step back.
If you are able to move through the world without fear of sexual assault, take one step forward.
If you were sexually active with several people and this traditionally improves your social reputation in other
    people's eyes, take one step forward.
If you worry that your religious attire (cross, yarmulke, turban) may cause ridicule or fear, take one step backward.
If you are able to drive carelessly without someone attributing it to your gender, take one step forward.
If you are relatively sure you can enter a store without being followed, take one step forward.
If your family automatically expected you to attend college, take one step forward.
If you have ever traveled outside the United States, take one step forward.
If national holidays reflect your religious upbringing, take one step forward.
If your parents worked nights and weekends to support your family, take one step backward.
If you can buy new clothes or go out to dinner when you want to, take one step forward.
If you can walk alone at any time of day or night without thinking about safety, take one step forward.
If you went to galleries, museums, and plays with your family growing up, take one step forward.
If you attended private school or summer camp, take one step forward.
If you were raised in a single-parent household, take one step backward.
If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school, take one step forward.

> If events that you go to rarely offer food prepared in ways your religion prescribes, take one step backward.
> If you have been a victim of sexual harassment, take one step backward.
> If you have been a victim of violence because of your race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, take one step
>   backward.
> If you regularly went on family vacations growing up, take one step forward.
> If you have ever had a maid, gardener, or cleaning service, take one step forward.
> If you can walk past a construction site without being looked up and down or catcalled, take one step forward.

Why do I put such concepts and questions at the beginning of the course rather than raising them strategically throughout the semester as different skills and processes surface and require attention? It is because putting them first empowers students from the outset to engage with understanding and self-awareness. By making differences in worldviews, experiences, and expectations about classroom dynamics explicit and subject to evaluation, students have a stronger sense of themselves and others and the breadth of challenges and commitments with which everyone in the class struggles. They are given the opportunity to consider what their own challenges and commitments are. A cautionary tale, however, may be more compelling than my simply saying so.

In fall 2014, I taught the first iteration of this course. The students were first-years and relatively diverse for a Bridgewater classroom, not just in terms of religious affiliation, but also in terms of political orientation, socioeconomic background, and racial/ethnic identities. I blithely presented the values and methods of civil discourse and interreligious encounter that we would be practicing in the course. No discussion, other than definitional clarifications, was structured in at all.

Dynamics in the classroom began to become tense about a third of the way into the semester. In particular, a very traditional male Christian student who was politically conservative began to evoke anger and frustration in three women students, two of whom were African American, and all three of whom self-identified as "urban." It was clear that class, race, and gender intersectional identities were in play. Other students, some of whom were not identified with any religious tradition, were increasingly silent in a classroom in which, despite its diversity, Christian voices were predominant. In addition, two or three students were biology and chemistry majors and they were unsure how to respond to Christian statements of faith; for instance, they were non-plussed by one student who expressed her belief in the reality and prevalence of demons in human affairs, including her own personal experiences with demons. The situation became more and more painful for the students.

Perhaps most detrimental, a tension developed between myself—a politically liberal, white, female PhD who was clearly invested in the principles and methods of public deliberation—and the three women students who perceived my pedagogical methods and the required student participation in deliberation as forced compliance, silencing, and disrespectful. Requiring speech-acts *can* feel coercive; difficulty performing them can cause embarrassment and create a real sense of vulnerability. The principles of public deliberation felt dominant class- and race-aligned to my three students and perhaps to others who remained silent. Theirs was a clear case of agonistic voicing of

values and concerns they perceived to be marginalized. They were not interested in being reasonable; they had another important fight to fight.

I knew they were resistant and angry, but could not get the class to a place where they could articulate what the problem really was. The rest of the class was frightened by what they perceived as "disrespect" by the three students towards me. In addition, racial dynamics were an explicit part of many conversations. Michael Brown had been shot in Ferguson that fall and the African American students wanted to talk about race. I suggested in several discussions that race and religion function analogously, though not identically, when it comes to understanding and respect across difference. Some white students were impatient and one, in particular, kept complaining that classroom discussion was getting "off-topic."

Finally, a conversation occurred in which one of the women students made an assertion, but did not provide any rationale for her position. In good public deliberation form, I tried to "reframe" what she had said, that is, to paraphrase her position, first asking if that is what she had actually meant and why, then sharing how her position could be understood from several different subject positions. She became very angry and said that this "reframing" stuff was "BS," a power play, and that I hadn't understood what she said at all and was misrepresenting her. The other two women chimed in that I had been misrepresenting them for weeks.

Here is a very good example of agonistic protest against a rational deliberative model that felt disingenuous to these students; that they saw as "located" (white academic authority) and therefore not reasonable; as pinning their excluded perspectives to a board like a moth; as wanting to discover only commonalities, and not differences. They forcefully called into question just how intersubjective our discursive model really was.

I responded the next class day with the following Powerpoint slides, in an attempt to open up a discussion of the very real tradeoffs and tensions that come from listening to and considering others' viewpoints, as well as some methods for doing this constructively, including being willing to become better at clearly articulating and clarifying one's own position when asked, and understanding the distinction between speakers' intent and real-time impact on listeners.

The goal of dialogue is not for participants or moderators to change others, but for participants to allow themselves to be changed through engagement with new experiences, ideas, and people – to gain new understandings based on the experiences of others.

The idea is to practice evaluating ideas *through interaction with others*; gathering evidence together; identifying assumptions and biases.

Reframing

- intent versus impact

- try your best to echo content, emotions, tone

- ask short open-ended questions
  - what is the problem?
  - who was involved?
  - can you explain more?

- try to summarize the best you can to make sure you have understood
  - questions are one way to do this:
    "so are you saying…?
  - attempts using phrases like
    "it sounds like you…"
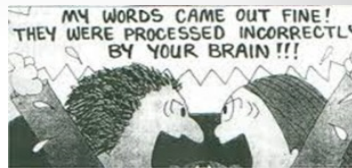
Discussion of the slides helped somewhat, but dynamics in the classroom never fully recovered. I held an "open forum" discussion at the end of term on the assumptions and values that define the practice of civil discourse. I received the following student responses in writing and during classroom discussion:

- Don't be afraid to speak up; freedom of speech.
- Understand why you are saying something.
- Sharing our experiences and combining our knowledge is good.
- Be open-minded. Respect.
- Helps people voice their opinion without being attacked and prevents others from attacking people.

- How to sound less like you're pushing your opinions on people, even though you are.
- That as a teacher you force us to talk about certain things and get to tell us what to believe.

This story is a fitting segue between pedagogical methods that promote metacognition, self-reflexivity, and awareness of intersectionality, and pedagogical methods that directly aim at exploring the usefulness of mind and heart in public deliberation, and practicing responsible communal deliberative work. Before moving on, I will sum up the following:

1. To the extent possible, teaching metacognition, self-reflexivity, and awareness of intersectionality should precede setting the more difficult tasks students attempt in public deliberation.
2. Clear developmental goals should be established for metacognition, self-reflexivity, and awareness of intersectionality based on students' age and year in college.
3. All of this work should include explicit discussion of the professor's intersectional identities and self-reflexivity so that the most obvious power dynamic in the classroom is studied as part and parcel of the practice of public deliberation.

Sustained teaching of public deliberation skills assumes that every class period entails at least a modicum of practice engaging in public deliberation, even if this means simply attempting active listening and seeking clarification as peers discuss their own and others' differing religious, spiritual, and/or non-religious identities and commitments. Beyond these, important skills to include are: gathering evidence collaboratively; identifying each other's assumptions and "selection biases;" paying attention to/recognizing one's own responses including intellectual, ethical, and religious perspectives and owning them; asking short open-ended questions; staying open to data that may be new, unfamiliar, or threatening, and so on. It should not be atypical to spend an entire class describing and practicing these skills, using content from religious, spiritual, and non-religious autobiographies.

In addition to this daily practice, mediated by autobiographical content that helps grease the wheels, it is optimal to schedule in official "civil discourse days," during which students may discuss interfaith issues relevant in the spiritual autobiographies they have read. In fall 2015, I offered three such days; the topics were: 1) "Religious Traditions and Intersectional Identities;" 2) "Intersections of Religion and Science;" and 3) "Authentic Engagement with Religious Others."

On civil discourse days, the professor is silent for 20 minutes (increasing to 45 minutes by the end of term), while the class attempts to answer the deliberative question(s) in play. A maximum of two questions is allowed, to ensure adequate deliberation on each question. At the end of the session, the class and professor debrief together about how the deliberation went. The professor's analysis enables students to explore their own and other students' contributions and roles, as well as how to map the conceptual and interpersonal evolution of each discussion.

Examples of deliberative questions I have used on civil discourse days include: "Can one be simply a Christian, or Buddhist, or Jain? Or is each person a mix of identities and experiences that make their relationship to their tradition unique?" and "Are religion and science compatible? Why or why not? If compatible, how?" For the first civil discourse day of the semester, the professor provides the deliberative question; thereafter, the students bring deliberative questions to the table

and they determine with the professor's help which questions are the most compelling and which to pursue that day.

How do students learn to recognize and pose deliberative questions? It is a lot more challenging for them than you might imagine. The 18-year-olds that I have taught have been extremely uncomfortable with deliberative questions that require evaluation and judgment, speech acts that they deem repressive, rude, and antisocial. They will revert back to comprehension or analytical questions without fail, if not encouraged and supported while they try to push themselves and their peers to deliberate and continue, in the face of inevitable disagreement, until they find a resolution or compromise position! The handouts below should be self-explanatory; they define and describe basic concepts and methods to help students practice public deliberation in the classroom.

HANDOUT #1
DELIBERATIVE VS. READING COMPREHENSION/ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS

A deliberative question is not a comprehension question; that is, it does not only ask about content. It does not even ask for analysis of content for the sake of understanding content better. It goes beyond these.

A deliberative question requires *evaluation of content and the implications of content* based on stipulated values, beliefs, or criteria.
Typically, these questions will:

- Ask about "should's," whether/how a topic is of value and how "we" should deal with the topic.
- Define the potential harm or benefit of the topic, in what contexts, and for whom.
- Argue the usefulness or uselessness of something, by considering to what end it might be used and whether that "end" is valuable? In what contexts might it be valuable? For whom?
- Ask for alternatives to the topic as it stands, options for different ways of thinking about the topic, different approaches to a solution, or different actions necessitated by it.
- Ask all of the above with clearly stated assumptions and values defined and justified.

Example questions:
1. Is the use of religion to justify gender hierarchies morally acceptable?
2. Should Hinduism and Islam (or any religion) have had as strong an impact on social and political structures as they did in the early 20th century as India fought for its independence from colonial rule?
3. Or, one might stipulate that a question will assume some value or belief—for instance, that human beings are intrinsically evil and require "saving"—and then ask what the implications of such a proposition are, for whom, and to what end. Those participating in discussion can "beg" the assumption or accept it, and deliberate together about its implications in the context of a larger question.

HANDOUT #2
DELIBERATIVE DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES

Leading a civil discourse discussion is all about *posing deliberative questions*, that is, questions which require:

1.   exploration and evaluation of multiple perspectives and propositions;
2.   making a joint decision about right answer(s); there may or may not be consensus.

ASSIGNMENT:

Take a central idea, experience, proposition, or lesson from the religious autobiography you are covering and turn it into <u>a deliberative question</u>. For example,

1.   PROPOSITION: "there is one spiritual truth and without it, human beings are damned."

2.   DELIBERATIVE QUESTION: Is there one spiritual truth and what must we
        do if there is one truth? What must we do if there is not one spiritual truth?

<u>Here are some techniques</u> you can try to incorporate into your discussion leadership. You don't have to try all of them. You can use whatever seems helpful as the discussion progresses. Your grade will reflect how hard you tried to use at least some of these, and how well.

3.   <u>Listen to your peers. "Map" the discussion</u> for your peers on the board or verbally. That means, remind them of what the main points are in the discussion, so you can all revisit them throughout the discussion.

4.   <u>Encourage everyone to speak</u>, using eye contact and occasionally asking, "What do you think, X?" Give people time to think before they speak.

5.   <u>Respond to, and seek clarification from, peers</u> as the discussion leader. Encourage peers to respond to, or seek clarification from, each other.

6.   <u>Point out connections</u> between what peers have said independently. Point out common ground in group responses. Point out clear disagreements and/or differing assumptions.

Keep pushing for a decision/multiple decisions about what the question has asked, such as:
                        What is right? What should we do? What must we think?

Keep conversation moving towards ---- > desirable outcomes/consequences.

Given these very practical guidelines, students learned quickly how to pose deliberative questions. Here are a few examples of deliberative questions students brought to discussions of different spiritual autobiographies:

After reading Surprise Sithole's autobiography, *A Voice in the Night*:
Starting with the quote, "When simple people accept and believe what the Bible says without question, God blesses them:" "*Should our faith mature from this simplicity*? Do questions make our faith 'better'? Is there an ideal faith to aspire to?"

After reading about Creation Spirituality and the link between metaphysics and science:
"If religion was out of the question, *which would you argue as true*: the big bang theory or superstring theory?"

After reading Shudha Mazumdar's autobiography, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*:
"Do you think that cultures that worship a divine feminine also hold women in higher esteem in their cultures? Do you think acknowledging this aspect of the divine is, then, *a necessary prerequisite to women's equality?* Do you think this is possible in your culture? Would you want it to be?"

Once students understand this first step of setting the stage for deliberative discussion, they must learn the skills of deliberative discussion: listening, seeking clarification, mapping the discussion, noting connections between contributions, responding to points made, reframing (sharing what a contribution means in the context of one's own, perhaps very different, circumstances and/or worldview), and pushing for warrants for action, through consent or simply concession to definitions of whatever the context-bound common good appears to be to the group. Following are some student responses to the experience of learning these skills:

ACTIVE LISTENING
"I discovered that sometimes the meaning and reasoning behind others' ideas can be polar opposite to what I am thinking. This technique is only to clearly identify what the conversation is about, as well as the identity of whoever is talking."

SEEKING CLARIFICATION
"'Why?' 'For what reason?' 'What do you mean by…?' These are a few of the basic questions Dr. Klancher taught us to ask one another in conversation. At first this seemed silly. The class would even mock asking the questions when first learning the technique. Now these questions are powerful enough to change the course of a conversation."

IDENTIFYING ASSUMPTIONS
"I remember the early classes when we began to discuss the Jews and their right to the Promised Land. A member of the class began speaking about whether or not it was right in the eyes of God for the Jews to kill and conquer other nations. The professor stopped the class to identify that the student was speaking with the assumption that there is a God. So much of my life conversations about actions and beliefs were conducted based on the assumption that there is a God! This has incredible influence on the direction or outcome of the discussion! I never realized that I bring the assumption of God to the table every time I talk to people."

COLLABORATIVE (NOT COMPETITIVE) PROBLEM-SOLVING
"As an individual I am more mindful and feel more in tune with others. I thought I would do fine in the class because I could 'defend' my opinion because in high school we were instructed to essentially debate topics. I now know that defining will gain me no knowledge nor develop my own opinions. Dr. Klancher told us to seek understanding through others' opinions rather than debating."

STAYING OPEN TO OTHERS' VIEWS and STAYING DELIBERATIVE
"Dr. Klancher would coach us on our speaking and thinking process with each small discussion. She would tell us to try and open ourselves up to understanding what each other was saying. She told us to think of 'goals' for conversations. She told us to question the meaning and seek clarification about what others were talking about. When actually conducting a conversation about religion, these reminders were key but difficult to hold onto."

Such observations are the fruit of continual opportunities for metacognition. Through assigned critical reflections that span the semester, students are encouraged to analyze their performance and, where it might help in understanding their performance better, compare or contrast their participation with that of others in the class. Students are asked to remember the components of civil discourse discussed in class and think hard about how they have tried to use them—successfully and unsuccessfully. Components are specified; for instance, they are asked if they have:

1. become more aware of the way other religious traditions understand the world, the holy, and humanity;
2. practiced "seeing through" perspectives other than their own, not just understanding them;
3. become more aware of their own views on religion and spirituality and how they affect their judgment of what others say, or of how emotions that arise triggered by discussions might affect their judgment of what others say;
4. listened attentively to their peers, letting go of their own internal monologue to really hear;
5. practiced repeating or "reframing" what a peer or the professor has said to make sure they got it and/or have considered how what has been said translates into their own world;
6. advocated for a position or idea, or argued against a position or idea;
7. tried to integrate logical, rational thinking with their personal intuitions, beliefs, and practices;
8. learned to identify what ideas and emotions they base their comments on whenever they analyze an idea or practice;
9. realized that they felt more than one way about a topic being discussed;
10. considered the *practical influence/consequences* of their ideas or positions in the real world, in creating a culture of peaceful pluralism.

Reflections are sometimes in the form of an essay, sometimes in the form of a journal entry, and the form affects the content; students tend to be more personal or self-revealing in journal entries. Reassurance that each of us learns as much from what goes wrong as we do from what goes right is key. Here are just two examples of student reflections on difficulties and frustrations:

TOLERATING CONTRADICTORY WORLDVIEWS AND EXPERIENCES
"I know my views and I know I can't change people's views on certain topics, but I did have problems with certain things that were said… Sometimes, I would feel rage when we would go off topic and talk about things like immigrants and them working here. I felt pure rage when C. and M. spoke down about them because I grew up and was mainly taken care of by an immigrant and I let them know that."

CALIBRATING INTENTION VERSUS IMPACT
"I've always had a decent idea of what I am talking about, but it's hard for me to voice it at times, because it would sound right in my head and then when I would open my mouth, it wouldn't make sense. Then I would be interrupted and it would be 'reframed' and it wouldn't seem like what I was saying at all."

To further help students to see themselves and the roles they take on in discussion, the professor may define deliberative roles for students, record their contributions during deliberations, and then provide the class with an overview of what they offered to the group and the discussion, as here below:

Student A "the active listener"	*listens carefully for content, emotion, and assumptions*, responds to peers with insightful reframing questions or comments
Student B "the generous thinker"	responds to peers, *shares experiences different from others'*, shares about her intersectional selves and their relationship to her culture/tradition, clarifies her own views, ready to share broadly
Student C "the glue"	starts the discussion, responds to peers, seeks clarification about peers' contributions multiple times, *makes connections between contributions, stays deliberative*
Student D "the open mind"	*tolerates dissonance creatively and constructively*, follows up on what peers say, suggests other ways of seeing propositions about topics
Student E "the sustainer"	responds to peers often, seeks clarification from peers often, shares his experiences openly, *keeps conversation going and directed*
Student F "the analyst"	refers to class info and autobios, *offers definitions/analysis*, questions, challenges, and/or expands on what peers say, *considers implications carefully and systematically*

Once the students have received this feedback, they are encouraged to "try on" a different role during the next deliberative discussion and see what they can accomplish in that role, as opposed

to their prior role. The very act of considering what impact they could have on a conversation, much less in their communities, has been a significant shift in consciousness for first-year students in my classes. Their skepticism about anything even approximating "democratic self-determination" is deeply engrained in them. The notion that people with differing religious, racial/ethnic, and political commitments could deliberate together about shared problems is suspect to students. This is not surprising, given the current state of national and global politics.

Concluding Thoughts

In the context of secular public deliberation models, participants who deliberate based on religious commitments, emotions, and loyalties to specific economic, racial/ethnic, or gender identity groups are more likely to be negatively understood as "subjective" and "irrational." This is the product of current hegemonic secular deliberative democratic models of civic engagement. Such participants' "private," "subjective," and "irrational" positions are compared to the Enlightenment-inspired "universal," "rational," "objective," and normatively male, idealized thinker of the erstwhile public sphere. Students are intuitively, if not always consciously, aware of this, which certainly contributes to their sense of inadequacy and distrust upon entering college and finding their place in "academic/intellectual" life. Allowing religiosity and rationality to come together within the deliberative process feels transgressive for a reason. In his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas understood the public sphere as "the social space in which force [formerly monopolized by the state] was transformed into the coercion of rational deliberation."[6] This norm has an immense amount of power in Western classrooms to *undeniably positive effect* on many levels. Yet Habermas from the very start recognized the coercive potential it holds.

In 1962, Habermas saw the emergence of the public sphere as trumping the force of the state and signaling the decline of religious authority in civic matters. Since then, as mentioned above, he has been considering the resilience and continuing centrality of religion globally and the need to forge a "postsecular stance" wherein religious ethics can be incorporated into a post-metaphysical way of thinking and engaging in the civic arena.[7] Yet his continued compartmentalizing of political arenas—his hardline division between scientific thinking holding sway in matters of "the objective world" and religion's continued relevance in the social and moral worlds—is reductive. Secular humanists and other scientifically literate citizens may not want creationism taught as science, but it is reductive, as the history of eugenics, stem-cell research, and the atom bomb, to name just a few, highlight, to think that science and morality are separate domains when it comes to public deliberation and political decision-making.

In *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, Charles Taylor argues that one "myth" of the Enlightenment is the "special status" attributed to "nonreligiously informed Reason."[8] He suggests that assuming that "religiously based conclusions will always be dubious and in the end only convincing to people who have already accepted the dogmas in question"[9] does not hold up, nor does the assumption that moral-political issues are best resolved by secular reason, understood "as a

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[6] Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere: Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Cornel West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 3.
[7] Jürgen Habermas, "The Resurgence of Religion: A Challenge to the Secular Self-Understanding of Modernity," (presentation, Fall 2008 Castle Lectures, Yale University, New Haven, CT, October 6–13, 2008).
[8] Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, 33.
[9] Ibid., 57.

language that everyone speaks" and can agree with.[10] I would argue, however, that it is clearly time to move beyond the work of validating religious thought or any kind of thought "as a language that everyone speaks." Our students need to become fluent in many "languages," many stories, and many practices, if they are to lead others towards interreligious peace.

In my classrooms, students quickly see that allowing religious, spiritual, humanist, and ethical arguments into the deliberative sphere opens the door to recognizing the rich complexity and intersectionality of individuals *in the classroom and beyond*, and evaluating the *practical communal implications* of rationales that people will bring to the table, including spiritual, religious, emotional, and ethical reasoning. They see that at its heart, interfaith deliberation is a pragmatic endeavor. It is closer to functionalist sociology than to metaphysical philosophy. It is an ethics of citizenship that submits religious, spiritual, and ethical traditions to the deliberative process in the interest of reaching whatever context-bound common good is optimal in the communal view, based on whatever kinds of reasons a specific community finds compelling, *without bracketing religiously informed contributions as Habermas does*. Disagreement is a given; silencing any group's thinking or experiences is not.

Cornel West has described valuable aspects of "the power of religion in our midst": religion offers "reservoirs of cultural memory," "compendiums of utopian yearnings," "distinctive moral visions," "compasses to track human misery and despair in the world," and "empathic and imaginative power that confronts hegemonic powers."[11] Religious and/or spiritual propositions undeniably cause dissonance in terms of their content, yet this should not preclude them being one *category of effective evidence* that may be used to support conclusions in civic matters. Technically, this does not contradict Habermas' definition of the public sphere as a "space for reason-giving, a realm in which reasons are forwarded and debated, accepted or rejected."[12] In the ever-ongoing intersubjective encounter that is pluralistic life-together, the full range of "data," of particular, lived perceptions, hopes, and protests, is *de facto* present, regardless of normative standards of engagement. If our students are to become leaders who enable encounter at all, if the plurality of religious and non-religious people and perspectives has any chance of shared life outside of niches and entrenched opposition, then they must learn to listen, hear, and encourage understanding with freedom, skill, and hope.

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[10] Ibid., 49.

[11] Ibid., 11.

[12] Ibid., 2–3.