

The Meanings of Dialogue in Interreligious Teaching and Learning Today **A Response by Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook to Elena Dini**

(original article: <http://irdialogue.org/journal/processing-experiences-within-an-academic-framework-a-challenge-for-interfaith-education-by-elena-dini/>)

Elena Dini's article, "Processing Experiences within an Academic Framework: A Challenge for Interfaith Education," speaks to the importance of dialogue within the overall framework of interreligious education,¹ especially in educational institutions such as seminaries and universities. The article speaks to the different models and philosophies utilized in schools today, provides a snapshot of the evolving role of interreligious dialogue in academia, and argues the importance of the ongoing development of the field. My reflection here will widen the focus onto the larger field of research and writing on interreligious learning, and briefly discuss the work of a number of the scholars within it.

Interreligious learning is a growing field of scholarly inquiry and pedagogical practice with the aim of helping all students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to interact, understand, and communicate with persons from diverse religious traditions; to function effectively in the midst of religious pluralism; and to create pluralistic democratic communities that work for the common good. In interreligious education, dialogue is as much about listening as it is about speaking. Learners must be religiously literate and capable of forming relationships with individuals, families, and communities in order to create environments that are supportive of multiple religious traditions, a variety of life experiences, and democratic action. As a process, it should be grounded in the spiritual journeys of individuals and groups, and connected to a vision for humankind to love one another as neighbors. Interreligious dialogue—a component part of interreligious learning—like other transformational experiences, occurs within groups. While this does not exclude the need for individual interreligious learning and reflection, these experiences alone do not replace the importance of genuine dialogue generated through forming relationships across religious traditions.

The questions Dini asks in her article are at the core of the history of the field of interreligious learning, as well as its ongoing development: "What can be taught to these people and how?" "How do we frame in academic terms what happens in those situations?" and "How is it then possible for the instructor to facilitate this process?"

In her article, Dini utilizes a key source in the field: *Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue* by David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell (2009). The need to integrate interreligious learning into theological education in order to prepare leaders for a religiously pluralistic world is the focus of a number of initiatives. This study moves the religious literacy of seminary graduates beyond Christianity, although that need is affirmed, to addressing ways theological schools address and structure interreligious engagement within the context of their curricula. Through case studies and sample syllabi, Roozen and Hadsell create "a

¹ While some authors use the terms "interfaith" and "interreligious" interchangeably, and while the former is the more popular term, in my work the default is to use "interreligious," because some religious groups do not consider themselves a "faith" tradition.

practical literature and related conversation among theological educators on the role of the practice of interfaith dialogue in the seminary curriculum.”²

My own recent study of interreligious learning, *God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities* (2014), goes beyond theological schools by taking a look at the roots of interreligious dialogue in Christian contexts, and then it addresses the pedagogical frameworks for dialogue found in academia, congregations, and religious organizations. The recent 50th anniversary of Vatican II is a reminder of the importance of the Council in opening the door to the possibilities of deeper learning between religious traditions through dialogue. Shortly after the Council, there was a burst of educational activity and publications from Christian organizations and denominations interested in pursuing interreligious dialogue. In these early years, a spirit of enthusiasm carried the day, and at times the need to develop intentional processes and language for encounter between religions was neglected. Some of those most engaged in interreligious dialogue in the early years were criticized for losing touch with their own faith communities; others maintained a more conservative reaction to the quick pace of changing attitudes toward other religious traditions. In the same era, the rise in fundamentalism across religious traditions also contributed to an attitude that positive religious pluralism and lasting peace were unrealistic dreams.³

Despite these challenges, the field of interreligious dialogue has expanded over the past 60 years. It should be noted here that the term “dialogue” originated and is most often used in Christian circles, though it sometimes is adopted by members of other religious traditions. In some cases “interreligious dialogue” is used synonymously with “interreligious learning.” In other cases, interreligious dialogue refers to specific processes designed for interreligious encounters, including dialogues between experts, interpersonal dialogues between persons of different religious traditions, and community dialogues that are linked to social engagement and peace-building initiatives.

The wide range of understandings of interreligious learning continues to expand today, including the dialogue tradition as well as a variety of approaches and methodologies to support and enrich encounters between different religious traditions. Rooted in the tradition of Vatican II, Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, publishes widely and is credited by many with developing the philosophy and pedagogy of interreligious thought and practice over the last 60 years. Swidler’s recent book, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions* (2014), is the culmination of his study of “the cosmic dance of dialogue,” a new way of life that encourages critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and authentic cooperation.

No critical exploration of interreligious learning would be complete without mention of the groundbreaking work of religious educator Mary C. Boys, now at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Boys’ work in interreligious education is foundational, particularly in relation to encounters between Jews and Christians. In one of her several books, *Christians & Jews in*

² David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell, *Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue* (Hartford: Hartford Seminary, 2009), 129.

³ G. Evers, “Trends and Development in Interreligious Dialogue,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* (22:2), 228-229.

Dialogue: Learning in the Presence of the Other (2006), Boys and Jewish educator Sara S. Lee, director emerita of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education and adjunct professor emerita of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, weave together interreligious teaching and learning from the perspectives of both Judaism and Christianity. Through personal stories, case studies, and observations tested through years of personal teaching experience, Boys and Lee make the connection between interreligious learning and the need to heal religious divisions by bringing people together to talk through difficult subjects such as religious identity, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel. Boys and Lee's theory of interreligious learning includes an emphasis on 1) "study in the presence of the other;" 2) intentionally connected content and process; 3) a hospitable environment which enables learners to cross religious boundaries; and 4) the need to "get inside" the religious tradition of another.⁴

The relational skills needed for meaningful dialogue in Abrahamic contexts is the focus of the book, *What Do We Want the Other to Teach About Us?* (2006), edited by David L. Coppola of the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. In it, the authors encourage dialogue as a process that first views "the other" in relationship with God before tackling the more abstract elements of religious belief. Coppola's book is a collection of essays on Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue written by experienced scholars and activists and geared for religious educators in local synagogues, churches, and mosques. "Dialogue and education are tools for each to approach the other as people in relationship with God first, and not as objects spouting abstract beliefs."⁵

In a similar vein, dialogical Jewish-Christian "conversations" as a means for greater interreligious understanding is the focus of the work of Joseph D. Small and Gilbert S. Rosenthal's edited volume of essays on covenantal partnership, *Let Us Reason Together: Christians and Jews in Conversation*, sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the National Council of Synagogues (2010). This book is one of the most deeply relational of the denominational works available. The book is offered as a model to local communities to encourage similar conversations that include controversial topics such as the State of Israel, conversion and proselytizing, and intermarriage.

The use of dialogue as a process to form relationships across religious differences is also found in literature on Christian-Muslim and Christian-Buddhist relationships. The literature on Muslim interreligious engagement continues to grow. For example, Jane Idelman Smith, professor of Islamic Studies at Harvard University and Hartford Seminary, writes on the history, practice, and challenges of current Muslim-Christian dialogues, in *Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (2007). Released in the same year, "A Common Word Between Us and You," a letter from 138 Muslim leaders worldwide sent to the leaders of major Christian denominations, and the Christian response, "Loving God and Neighbor Together," affirmed both the differences between the two traditions, as well as their shared commitment to love God and to love our neighbors. The published letters and responses in *A Common Word* are one example of the emergent dialogue between the two traditions (2010). In a similar way, interreligious

⁴ Mary C. Boys and Sara Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue. Learning in the Presence of the Other* (Burlington: Skylight Paths, 2006), 95.

⁵ David L. Coppola, *What Do We Want the Other to Teach About Us? Jewish, Christian and Muslim Dialogues* (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2006), xv.

engagement between Christians and the dharma traditions is also growing in interest. Professor Paul Ingram of Pacific Lutheran University studied the process of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, mapping out the conceptual, socially-engaged, and interior dimensions of each tradition.

The idea that interreligious learning is rooted in hospitality and welcome is central to the approach of several scholars. The importance of hospitality, as seen through the biblical text, is a framework for interreligious learning often used by evangelical Christian contributors to the field. For example, Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong, an important evangelical voice in interfaith relationships, explores scripture, the practices of Jesus, and the early church to conclude that adherents of other religions are not objects for conversion, but rather a religious neighbor to whom hospitality must be extended and received, in his *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (2008). Through a pneumatological framework, Yong argues that if hospitality plays a central role in the Christian theology of other religions today, then the result is not only a set of ideas but a correlative set of practices. “Christian mission in a post-modern, pluralistic, and post-9/11 world is constituted by evangelism, social witness, and interreligious dialogue and that evangelism and proclamation always involve social engagements and interreligious dialogues of various kinds,” he writes.⁶

English Jesuit Michael Barnes, in *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (2012), argues for the importance of interreligious hospitality, along with an emphasis on difference *and* particularity in the search for meaning. Barnes’ philosophical approach describes three shifts or “movements” that occur in relationship with the other. The first, “meetings,” attempts to situate interreligious encounter within the context of theology and history. Here he offers the image of religious traditions as “schools of faith” where teachers and learners can meet and ask questions about beliefs, actions, prayers, and rituals with integrity. The second movement, “crossings,” emphasizes the need for people to be able to translate across cultural boundaries if they are to learn the skills necessary for dialogue. “Imaginations,” the third movement, concerns the return back across the threshold of engagement to reflect on the ways that faith is enhanced through both interreligious learning and the need to imagine an alternative future. Barnes’ movements are not intended as fixed stages, but rather as a way of reflecting on the elements of the spirituality of interreligious dialogue. “More important than any such logic is the conviction which guides me throughout that, while Christian faith and the beliefs and practices of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists may be saying different things, the very attempt to grapple with difference in a spirit of generous respect can be mutually supportive and illuminating.”⁷

The connections between peace-building and interreligious dialogue and learning made by Amos Yong are echoed in the work of educators and activists from across religious traditions. Here the focus is on building relationships across religious boundaries in an effort to gain greater understanding, and to foster reconciliation. In an earlier work by David R. Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peace-Building* (2000), the author takes up the question of the relationship of religion to peace-building, and then offers principles in support of dialogue processes. More

⁶ Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2008), 129.

⁷ Michael Barnes in *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xiii-xiv.

recently, *Peace-Building By, Between and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians* (2009), edited by Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David Augsburger, is a compilation of articles by Christians and Muslims on topics related to interreligious peace-building, such as religious identity, religious conversion and apostasy, interreligious dialogue, conflict transformation, and human rights.

Interreligious learning for young people is also a growing field, although faith communities in the United States have fewer resources in this area to draw on than do those in regions such as the United Kingdom and some European countries, where religion is taught as an academic subject in schools. However, the connections between young people's interest in learning more about other religions and forming friendships is a central theme in current interreligious youth programming. Eboo Patel, director of the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), and IFYC's research director Patrice Brodeur studied a wide range of international initiatives and projects of the "first interfaith generation" in their book, *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action* (2006). In addition to building a knowledge base for interreligious youth work, their work is intended to contribute to the global interfaith youth movement. "One of the goals of this movement," they write, "is to empower each other to pioneer new and cooperative learning paths at the same time as we make room for critical self-reflection through which scholarship can be produced as another tool for empowerment."⁸

A recent work that offers a much needed synopsis of the many different approaches to interreligious dialogue in international organizations within the past 30-50 years is by interreligious scholar Douglas Pratt, from the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and the University of Bern, Switzerland, *Being Faithful Being Open: The Journey of Interreligious Dialogue* (2014), and was explicitly written with the intent of expanding the "praxis" of dialogue in the future.

Lastly, one of the most creative new books that engages a full spectrum of the possibilities and challenges of interreligious learning is *Interreligious Learning and Teaching: A Christian Rationale for a Transformative Praxis* by Kristin Johnson Largen, Mary E. Hess, and Christy Lohr Sapp (2014). In a sense, these authors offer the next steps in more intentional interreligious pedagogies, including the dialogue tradition, and place them within the tradition of student teaching and learning. The book itself is ingeniously designed as a dialogue between the three authors, all of whom are experienced interreligious educators.

As the field of interreligious learning continues to grow, more research on interreligious learning for all ages needs to be done within and across religious traditions, particularly on those approaches that develop religious literacy along with dialogue skills across social identities. To be sure, the contours and the articulation of interreligious learning vary across traditions. But at same time, we know different traditions can share in interreligious learning that is based in personal narratives, religious literacy, sharing sacred spaces, compassionate action, and initiating intentional interreligious learning communities.

⁸ Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur, *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 1, 6-7.

A number of contemporary trends and challenges present other opportunities for research, thinking, and writing within the field. The growth in many regions in the creation of interreligious sacred spaces engenders the need for more reflection on the ways we can pray together in our particularity, and at the same time avoid the misappropriation of the practices of other faith traditions. The intersection of interreligious learning and online learning pushes the borders of our delivery systems for all religious education. Considering how to build bridges with interreligious families and as well with those who claim multiple religious identities are two practical needs related to growing religious pluralism, as is the need for more research on the impact of race and religion in local communities. Finally, religious leaders across traditions who are skilled in interreligious engagement are needed in local communities, to help build on the local level a greater vision and practice of interdependence and intergroup healing.

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