

In the Absence of the Religious Other: Interreligious Encounter through Text Study in Theological Education

A Response by Karla R. Suomala to Melissa Heller

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A new question

How do you integrate interfaith learning and experience into theological education in a meaningful, transformative way? This question, believe it or not, is fairly new. Twenty years ago, even fifteen, it was a question few seminaries were seriously asking. Many offered a course or two in religions other than Christianity, but they were almost always electives. The situation today, however, is radically different. Some scholars and observers point to September 2001, as the turning point, after which it was no longer possible to ignore America's growing religious diversity.

In a relatively short time, within a system not known for rapid change, interreligious education has moved from being a good idea to a requirement for accreditation at seminaries and divinity schools in the United States and Canada. In 2012, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) approved the following stipulation for all Master of Divinity programs:

A.2.3.2 MDiv education shall engage students with the global character of the church as well as ministry in the multifaith and multicultural context of contemporary society. This should include attention to the wide diversity of religious traditions present in potential ministry settings, as well as expressions of social justice and respect congruent with the institution's mission and purpose (ATS, 3).

This is in part due to the recognition on the part of ATS and its member schools that interreligious learning is critical to theological education in the 21st century.

Melissa Heller's article, "Jewish-Christian Encounter Through Text: an Interfaith Course for Seminarians," is an example of a course that exceeds ATS expectations in both its depth and scope of learning. The remarkable cooperation between three different seminaries—mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish—in the Philadelphia area contribute to the distinctiveness of this course. The sustained and focused learning experience that Heller describes moves students beyond suspicion or rudimentary knowledge of a distant "other" to the possibility of being in relationship with each other. This is ultimately the goal for those of us committed to interreligious education, and who realize that relationship is often the most powerful impetus to real learning. In cases like this, relationship can inspire curiosity and provide the framework in which religious learning is no longer done in the abstract, but occurs "on the ground" where deeper understanding and transformation can take place.

Holy envy

With this being said, I have to admit to feeling "holy envy" as I read Heller's article. I suspect that there are many professors and teachers who, like me, would love to offer courses on this

model but simply cannot. The asymmetry of religious traditions represented in a given area or region make it impossible. According to a recent study by Pew Research Center, Christians still form a large majority in the United States—roughly 70% identify with some flavor of Christianity (2015). Those belonging to non-Christian traditions are increasing rapidly, but still make up only 5.9% of the population. That means that even where there is significant religious diversity, there are always many more Christians than Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus (or others) available to enter into interreligious conversation or partnership.

At Luther College where I teach, the student body (along with the general population in the area) is significantly more Christian (at least by context and culture, if not by commitment) and much less religiously diverse than the national picture. Located in the rolling hills of northeast Iowa, most of the religious diversity on this undergraduate liberal arts campus comes from the international student population, which is relatively small. In addition, during my 14 years at Luther, I've discovered that students (coming primarily from the Midwest and often from small towns) usually don't have significant previous interreligious experience--most don't have friends or acquaintances from non-Christian traditions, and a surprising number have never met or talked to people outside their own traditions.

Living in a city doesn't ameliorate the situation entirely, though. Those who teach in more diverse settings still have real and significant challenges when designing and offering interreligious courses and programming. While numbers alone don't determine the quality of the interreligious experience, they are indicative of the less visible issues of perception and power. At a basic level, Christians, through their own lived experience in this culture, enter into interreligious encounters well aware of the great diversity within their own tradition. Due to their majority status, they often fail to understand or even note the great diversity within the tradition of the other, often viewing it as monolithic. This demands the impossible from those in the religious minority: to single-handedly represent their traditions and the people belonging to them.

The cultural location of interreligious encounters in North America also has significant implications for the power dynamics between majority and minority traditions. Considering interreligious learning in light of post-colonial and feminist theories and approaches, Riitaoja and Dervin have recently argued that, where this kind of inter-religious asymmetry exists (as in other situations of asymmetry),

The Other who is seated at the negotiation table is...the *representation* of an Other constructed by the [majority] actors. The figure of the Other is their own reflection. The Other cannot speak because her voice is not heard (Spivak 1988). She can "speak" and make her "choice" only within the logic and under the conditions predetermined by the 'locals' (Riitaoja & Dervin, 3).

They go on to suggest that "the presence of the majority in the space excludes other ways of being" and that "dialogue can actually be harmful for those who are constructed as Others" (Riitaoja & Dervin, 7). These are statements that we need to consider more fully in future research.

In the face of these conditions, Heller is quite right in pointing to the importance of Jewish students being able to act as hosts—in terms of location and setting—to their Christian guests. Putting Jewish and Christian students on more equal footing with each other opens up the possibility that both groups might be able to speak and be heard on their own terms. Within the larger Christian culture, the interreligious experience she describes changes (if even briefly) the power dynamic and gives all of the students who are not accustomed to this reversal in roles an opportunity to see themselves and their relationship to the religious other from a new perspective.

It's all about the text

I don't want to underestimate the challenges of designing and offering meaningful inter-religious learning experiences in settings of limited religious diversity. For students, the barriers between "us" and "them" are high, and the incentive to imagine a "we" isn't as strong in the absence of real human faces and stories which would be much harder to ignore. In addition, students may jump to conclusions or overestimate what they know about a religious tradition and its adherents when there is no peer corrective in the classroom. There is also the potential to be far less sensitive to nuance since the religious traditions and its adherents are considered in the abstract. That being said, I still believe (really) that it is possible to challenge these tendencies and to put a little flesh on the abstract.

I've found--very much like Heller--that the study of sacred text is key to building bridges between traditions, particularly between Christians and Jews. Much of my teaching load consists of courses in Hebrew Bible and Judaism. In both of these courses, I introduce students to rabbinical reading and interpretive strategies through the reading of *Midrash* (rabbinic interpretation) alongside the biblical text, and reflect on how the rabbis understood their role in relation to both text and to G-d. I've found that the pairing of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) in Genesis 22 and the rabbinic rendering of this passage in Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu works well as a starting point (Berman, 41-49). Then, having the students form pairs (hevruta-style, as in many Jewish "houses of study") and providing a sampling of biblical texts, I ask them to "practice" the rabbinic enterprise of identifying gaps through close reading. I encourage them to proceed slowly, focusing on words and phrases, asking as many questions as they can think of along the way. Over a two- or three-week period, part of each class is devoted to this kind of *hevruta* study, with the students remaining in the same pairs.

In my Judaism course, students bring this exercise full circle and students are required to write their own *midrashim* based on biblical passages they have selected and "workshopped" in *hevruta*. The students in my classes are not trying to imitate the ancient rabbis in style or focus, which requires mastery of the Hebrew language and its grammar, among other things. Instead, I invite students to think rabbinically when they read the biblical text as a way to develop their own modern *midrashim*. I provide examples of this genre and outline a process that helps them get started. This involves paying special attention to both what is there—e.g. unusual words, the meanings of names and places, the settings in which the stories take place and what is not there—e.g. back stories, sensory detail, and the emotions and motivations of characters. The article "White Fire: The Art of Writing Midrash" by poet and author Alicia Ostriker is one resource that has proved very helpful in this regard. Great examples of what Ostriker describes are increasingly available and also very useful in showing students what a *midrash* might look

like. See, for example, Michal Lemberger's recently published *After Abel and Other Stories* for *midrash*-like stories focusing on the perspectives of biblical women.

Student outcomes

Though my students are generally in pairs that share the Christian tradition, I am intrigued to realize that studying texts *hevruta*-style elicits reactions and responses very much like those of the seminarians in the article. Students in both my setting and Heller's note the awkwardness and uncertainty they feel as they enter into conversation with their partners. My students routinely indicate that part of their anxiety comes from not wanting to offend or be put on the defensive by their *hevruta* partners; they don't want to be the first to make a statement or voice an opinion, not knowing where their partner is on the spectrum from conservative to liberal. This seemed to be a concern for the students in Heller's course as well, although she also notes that some mainline Protestant and Jewish pairs had difficulty finding areas of disagreement. Interestingly, this usually has very little to do with their particular tradition and much more to do with what segment of that tradition the student identifies with.

An additional reason my students give for their initial uneasiness with each other and the exercise generally is that they aren't used to talking out loud (with anyone, but particularly someone they don't know) about what they consider "religious stuff." They are afraid that they don't have the knowledge base or vocabulary to do it very well. The idea that religion can be a topic of discussion in an academic setting (as opposed to a family or devotional setting) is an alien one, because they are convinced that religion is private and individual. Coming primarily from public schools, talking about religion is something my students have never done in a classroom setting. This exercise gives them an opportunity to talk about religious texts and ideas in a more neutral setting with people they don't know well, developing confidence in and knowledge about their own perspectives while increasingly being able to both learn from and respectfully challenge their partners (with whom they don't always agree). While not necessarily developed in the presence of a religious other, the skills they gain are critical to being able to engage religious others when the opportunity arises.

Finally, a response that many of my students and some of the Christian students in Heller's course share is the initial discomfort with asking questions of sacred text. One PTS student summed it up well:

As Christians most of us do not argue with a text very well, let alone find fault with one. If I have come to appreciate anything about the Jewish relationship to the biblical text, it is the willingness to hold it as a dialogue partner and at the same time, very holy (Heller, 37).

The students in my classes who have echoed this statement go on to point out how liberating the rabbinic reading strategy is for them. For all of my students, and especially those who write modern *midrashim* and engage the process of thinking rabbinically even more deeply, asking questions and filling gaps allows them to see (what they had previously considered) their own sacred text in an entirely different light. Reading selections of their own *midrashim* in groups of peers gives students a tangible connection to a completely new world, based not simply on *what* they know about Jews and Judaism but *how* they know and experience the tradition. In the

process, their own religious experience is enriched, and they often discover curiosity about and openness to the people and sacred texts of other religious traditions.

There is still much to be done in the development of effective interreligious pedagogy when teaching in the “presence of a few,” or even in the complete “absence of the religious other.” However, as I hope I have demonstrated here, I think it is possible, important, and more significantly, fruitful to provide students with opportunities to develop knowledge about and even appreciation for religious others and their traditions, even when those others are hardly or not at all present in the flesh. Hopefully, what we do will inspire them to seek out relationships with religious others, both in and beyond the contexts in which they find themselves. Certainly those of us who do this kind of teaching should push ourselves to consider how our pedagogy might maximize the likelihood that our students will do that seeking, and that it will result in constructive interreligious encounters and relationships.

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