

***Intersectionalities and Cosmopolitanisms in Interreligious Studies***  
**A Response by Najeeba Syeed to Jeannine Hill Fletcher**

(original article: <http://irdialogue.org/journal/constructing-religious-identity-in-a-cosmopolitan-world-the-theo-politics-of-interfaith-work-by-jeannine-hill-fletcher/>)

Jeannine Hill Fletcher presents us with a challenge that has a long genealogy in the formation of Christian theology. She cites works from scholars who undress existing and historical Christian thought to unveil the racist formations of hegemonic white authority; she also uses these works to separate out an inquiry into a feminist and gendered analysis of theological enterprises, and into how bodies are allowed, encouraged, or sanctioned to be agents in those discursive spaces.

While these concerns have long been present in Christian theological debates within the US, we are just beginning to witness a cross over into the interreligious studies field. Scholars like Jerusha Lamptey have looked through the lens of gender at theologies of religious pluralism. However, scholarship on gender in the construction of emerging “interreligious” programs, departments, and literature is still in its infancy stage.

The divergent strains of a political reading of interreligious scholarship and the normative goals of many interreligious curricula are producing a range of starting points and end goals as this emerging field develops. One might categorize interreligious education emanating from at least two epistemic commitments. The first constitutes an approach to interreligious engagement that seeks to promote interfaith harmony and citizen-participants who adhere to a common understanding of civil religion. Another set of scholars and practitioners construct religion as a modality that interacts with culture; they would emphasize the role of religious identity in concert with other intersectional, communal identities. Hill Fletcher’s critical engagement is along these latter lines, and is an important shot in the arm to help this approach become seen as a legitimate approach to interreligious studies.

As Hill Fletcher points out, the goal of interfaith dialogue and studies is the creation of an “interfaith community.” Interreligious education was born in an ecosystem of confessional origin that promoted particular sets of beliefs. Hill Fletcher helps us to understand another normative outcome, in addition to the theological aspects of interreligious education: the creation of community itself, one that is both an overarching goal for the field as well as a potential limiting contour for study, inquiry, practice, and scholarship in interreligious education.

While she writes eloquently about the construction of the selves as the table of dialogue, especially in their embodied emanations, I am increasingly fixated on how the construction of religion itself must be complexified. This piece sparked my thinking about the need to not just move to a breadth of intersectionalities, which Hill Fletcher would have us do, but also to analyze the depths in which the academy utilizes Christian-dominated assumptions of “religion.” As Talal Asad argues in his work *Genealogies of Religion*, “...there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically

specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”<sup>1</sup>

The exclusions that Asad implicitly points to, if we consider interreligious education’s origin in the Christian seminary and Christian theological history (as Hill Fletcher points out), are a product of a so-called universal definition of religion that is not neutral; indeed, those exclusions may result from an operation of making-invisible that is at least in part deliberate. I would argue that while cosmopolitanism is a very useful generalizable principle for engaging contested identities, it is still a tool yet untested on the bleeding edges of interreligious studies, and one that needs to be examined for its profound and potentially insidious reification of conventional wisdoms of religion as highly organized, textual, and construed in the North American model of congregational structures. Dennis Kelley, a religious studies scholar with a research emphasis on religious practices of indigenous peoples, asks, “...whether ‘belief’ was ever the primary aspect of ‘religion’”<sup>2</sup> and writes, “The old [models of] ‘Western’ religions [as] religions of church and hierarchy are no longer tenable (if indeed they ever were), and one can see the utility of categories associated with land use, the role of nature, language, ceremony, and so on for the study of such American religious contexts as rural Christian demographic distribution or suburban Muslim women’s social networking.”<sup>3</sup> Future directions in the field of interreligious education can benefit from deconstructing the definition of “religion,” not just in tracing the origin of its study and construction, but also in developing new terminologies and methods of study based on exploration of existing communities on the ground—communities that have not always been at the interfaith table, nor studied as sources of theological scholarship.

Hill Fletcher also engages cosmopolitanism as a construct and method for advancing embodied interreligious dialogue and scholarly research. One assumption of cosmopolitanism that Hill Fletcher identifies is a certain language of universality that is predicated on access to a lexicon of pluralism that operates in the public rendition of religion. If intersectionality, as she points out, is the goal of the production of our lenses for scholarly inquiry, the attendant form of cosmopolitanism must be addressed as well. We must not only construe how race and gender are variables to address; our newly formed lenses should also consider how cosmopolitanisms make assumptions regarding class as well, and what can be learned from communities who experience multiple forms of marginalization. From their lived religion experiences and knowledges, we gain insights into functional forms of cosmopolitanisms that may be obscured by classist constructions of the concept. Further exploration is called for into the ways that class both defines and undermines the notion of religion as membership-driven in particular communities, as well as how class shapes who has agency to participate in interfaith tables as currently constructed. Specifically, we might look deeper into the notion of “working class cosmopolitanism.”<sup>4</sup>

On this topic, Pnina Werbner writes, “In my work I bring a counter-example of ‘working-class cosmopolitanism’ in the figure of the expanding cosmopolitan subjectivity of a Pakistani migrant worker working on a building site in the Gulf, a simple man who embraces different cultures and

<sup>1</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Kelley, *Tradition, Performance, and Religion in Native America: Ancestral Ways, Modern Selves* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xiv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>4</sup> Pnina Werbner, “Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” *Theory Culture and Society* (2006): 497.

is a member of diverse ethnic groups, but who nevertheless retains his localized rooted identity as a Sufi.<sup>5</sup> Locally rooted identities may not be easily negotiated away into a larger soup of pluralism that creates a civil culture aimed at productive citizenship. If communities themselves are not granted citizenship, in fact denied it as undocumented workers, in many ways their religious identities are not configured in a cosmopolitan social scape. This is for two reasons: 1) If pluralism is predicated on a notion of civic engagement, the undocumented worker is legally invisible in such scenarios, unable due to status to participate publicly in interfaith engagement that is often the public performance venue created by civic or government leaders to furthering their goals of harmony between traditions. 2) Scholars have recognized the precarious position that undocumented workers hold in the religious landscape of formally organized faith communities. They have noted a politics of invisibility that holds the houses of worship often in a role that may limit the participation of undocumented workers. In a case study of 60 churches, Caroline Nagel argues that churches balance a radical theology of hospitality against the law and order discourse of the larger social ethos. To expect undocumented migrants to be “included” in formal religious communities does not recognize the barriers that they face both in religious and civic convening spaces.<sup>6</sup>

Another pressing question about the reality of marginalized communities is how to recognize and work with their histories of subjugated knowledges. Sharon Welch asks, “What happens when the oppressed speak for themselves? Insurrections of subjugated knowledges bring about new interpretations of Christian symbol and texts, new analyses of social structures, critiques of the institutional structure of the church, and solidarity with others.”<sup>7</sup> Oppressed groups often have a hybridity of urgency. They function perhaps on the larger scale, recognizably within a state-sanctioned religious community, but often mix practice because of present and historical oppression. They may have had to hide their religious practices because the oppressive systems in which they operated would consider the deep community practices as problematic or challenging existing power structures. Therefore a hybridity of interior ritual and external manifestation of doctrinally-acceptable belief and behavior emerge.

Kwok Pui Lan eloquently and succinctly captures a further tension in the recognition that “not all hybridities are equal” in her book *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue*.<sup>8</sup> She offers a rigorous and problematized explanation of this social phenomenon and attacks the notion that hybridity is a horizontal, flat terrain of religious identity transference.<sup>9</sup> Interfaith tables and studies make specific assumptions about the membership cards that religious actors carry to the conversation.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Under the Radar: Undocumented Immigrants, Christian Faith Communities, and the Precarious Spaces of Welcome in the U.S. South,” Special Issue on Migration, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 44-45.

<sup>8</sup> Kwok Pui Lan, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 64.

<sup>9</sup> Najeeba Syeed, “The Politics of Interreligious Education,” Spotlight on Theological Education: American Academy of Religion, <https://www.aarweb.org/publications/spotlight-on-theological-education-march-2014-the-politics-of-interreligious-education>.

We must think in many ways about how an intersectional approach to interreligious dialogue and studies disrupts the existing categories of “religion.” This is a central contribution of feminist theologians to the field; as I noted during a 2015 panel presentation:

Feminism relocates categories of religion and interrogates religion as a construct reconsidering the importance of lived religion. Feminists have helped ask questions that relocate the actual spaces where religion functions outside of formal religious houses of worship, expanded the definitions of which communities are brought to the table of religious convenings. By considering gender and intersectional aspects of identity, feminists consider sources of identity beyond the merely religious allowing for a more nuanced rendition of inextricable links that may exist between religion, race, gender, ethnicity and language...”<sup>10</sup>

Hill Fletcher’s work deftly and eruditely sets forth a research agenda for our future line of questioning and scholarly interrogation of existing concepts and categories. The complexity she calls for and the suspicion she arouses toward simplicity are clarion calls to surface and challenge the normative goals and potential self-righteousness of interreligious studies. My recommendation is to not stop here, but to see how interreligious dialogue actually illuminates, connects to, and opens the door to a critical approach of the existing ways theology is done.

Furthermore, interreligious studies has the potential to be a player in the discursive game of self-reflective theological and religious studies scholarship, or it can choose to remain on the sidelines as a tool of potential suppression of voices. The impact of interreligious studies that sees and conducts itself in the former mode rather than the latter—that is, if prosecuted with a continuous and continually critical and sharp scholarly pen—will, in addition, help further expose the pro-Christian bias of religious studies itself.

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<sup>10</sup> Najeeba Syeed, “Feminist Theology, Four Perspectives,” a panel discussion hosted by Claremont School of Theology on Wednesday, September 17th, 2015: [https://storify.com/CST\\_News/feminist-theology-four-perspectives](https://storify.com/CST_News/feminist-theology-four-perspectives).