

***Reflections on the History of the Journal of Inter-Religious Studies:  
A Conversation***

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*This is an edited transcript of a conversation that took place in February 2016, facilitated by the current JIRS Editor-in-Chief (SF), with its founding editors (SVN and JS) and its co-publishers (CI, JP, and OR).*

PART I: BEGINNINGS AND LANGUAGE

SUE: Stephanie and Josh, I'd like to ask the two of you to start us off by doing a bit of both reminiscing and analyzing. Tell us about the beginning of the Journal--how it was formed, how it developed, and how it grew in the early days?

JOSH: Stephanie, why don't you start with the e-mail you got out of the blue from a rabbinical student in Jerusalem?

STEPHANIE: In 2008, I was a student at Union Theological Seminary, and I was editor of the student paper there and student senate co-chair. In those capacities, my e-mail address was on the website. Union had just brought Professor Paul Knitter over and had started to do a lot more interfaith work. One day, I got an e-mail saying, "I'm a rabbinical student, and I'm interested in doing an interfaith magazine for seminarians. I'm wondering what's going on where you are with interfaith work? Are you guys doing anything?"

My reaction was, "Oh, yeah. Let me tell you about what we're doing!" I told him what I was working on personally and what was happening at Union, and we started e-mailing back and forth. He told me more about his own work and his idea for a journal or magazine. We started to pursue it, and over time, as we began to interview potential board members and potential staff people, the idea became clearer that there really wasn't a place for younger faculty members, or any faculty or scholars, to publish this kind of article—that is, articles that were truly interreligious. Not comparative theology, not comparative religion, not monoreligious, but a journal that was academic, peer-reviewed, and not affiliated with a single religion. It feels very strange to me that two grad students could think to themselves, "There's this hole in the field--we should just start something and fill it," but that's what we did.

Josh was in Jerusalem, and I was in New York City. We estimate that, by the time we met for the first time in New York, we had already worked together for 1,000 hours over Skype, phone, and e-mail. When we met in person, it struck me that he was a lot taller than he sounds on e-mail!

SUE: What was it that occasioned this realization, and what was happening for scholars who were doing what they considered work in interreligious studies before this? Were people even thinking of that as a field? What was happening before the Journal's existence?

JOSH: I was an angsty rabbinical student who was really stunned that I was studying in

Jerusalem and not even learning outside my denomination, much less my tradition. I had been involved in interfaith work for a while, and it just didn't make sense to me. As I talked with people, it seemed like there wasn't really an extant field of interreligious studies. And so there wasn't necessarily a set of resources, even the academic literature that one would hope for if trying to study other religious traditions, especially in a city like Jerusalem. That was what prompted my e-mail to Stephanie; my call to Eboo Patel, who was then Executive Director of the Interfaith Youth Core where I had been a fellow; and a lot of related conversations.

There were a few other publications in the field at the time, including the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, as well as *Interreligious Insight* which is based out of the UK. It struck me that they were working with a very traditional academic model that was not making use of the Internet, and of the growing network of scholars and practitioners who were really, in a more ad hoc way, building this field.

So, there might be a scholar of theology, who happened to do a lot of comparative work, and was sort of inching toward interreligious studies; or a practitioner of interreligious work who was starting to do the reflective piece, making sense of which programs worked in an interfaith context and which didn't. People were starting to generate the articles, the stories, and other writings in what would now be seen as interreligious studies, but there wasn't necessarily the forum to tie them together. They were talking largely in silos.

I think our hope--and I would say the beautiful naiveté of two graduate students—was that we could somehow move things forward by getting the right people in the room. A real advantage that Stephanie and I had is that, as graduate students, it was already clear that we could only be conveners. We couldn't be the ones directing the conversation. I think that was tremendously important, and helpful, coming from a place of humility and uncertainty, as we tried to weave together the beautiful and brilliant voices that weren't necessarily in dialogue with each other.

SUE: I think that there might be a piece to be written on the beauty that can emerge precisely from a humble approach to a piece of work.

Jenny, Or, and Celene--what can you add from your sense of where the field of interreligious studies was eight years ago, and especially in terms of publishing, whether you have any sense of why there was this gap and whether there was even a perception of the gap at that point in time?

JENNY: I do think that Josh and Stephanie identified an important gap, while at the same time there were different strands of this work going on in different ways. For me, interreligious studies or interfaith studies is really the joining together of two movements, two sectors, where we think about how we relate to each other across religious lines.

One is the interfaith movement world--for example, the North American Interfaith Network (NAIN), a decades-old, grassroots organization that was involved in thinking about how we relate across religious lines; and organizations that I was involved with in the 90s like the Interfaith Youth Core, the United Religions Initiative, the Parliament of World Religions, and the Interfaith Center of New York. There were a lot of national interfaith organizations that were very actively talking, thinking, and organizing people, both academics and religious

professionals. That's an important backdrop against which the idea for the Journal really was an important next step.

In Europe, there is also *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, which is a journal launched about 25 years ago. There are also a number of academic faculty titles in European universities that include the language of interreligious dialogue or interreligious studies.

So I think Josh's insight is a good one--that there were threads and strands of this work going on in different ways and places, but there wasn't really an American online journal that captured that energy. *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* is noteworthy and important here, though, because even though the title is *Ecumenical Studies*—which usually refers to intra-Christian issues--they really expanded pretty quickly to include multiple religious voices in ways that we could call interreligious studies.

A last thing to note is that this word or phrase that we use easily now—"interreligious"—is still something that's developing in academia. Things change really slowly in academia, but I think we are moving from the paradigm of a history of religions or world religions approach to studying other religious traditions, into using the language of interreligious studies--at least in certain places. It's just beginning, and is still in its early stages.

The Journal is ahead of its time in terms of helping legitimate and focus people's interest and energy around this language, and fostering thinking about new paradigms for how we study and engage with each other across religious lines.

SUE: Let's pick up on the language of "interreligious dialogue" (which was in the original title of the Journal) vs. the phrase "interreligious studies." Can you talk about the significance of those phrases as you think about the beginnings of the Journal?

STEPHANIE: That's a question that comes up in just about every manifestation of this conversation that I've had over the last ten years: Is it interreligious? Is it interfaith? Is it dialogue? Is it studies? Is it multireligious? Is it multifait? Is it interfaith? Is it interbeing?

This came up even when we were interviewing staff. I remember an early staff member, the founding Executive Editor Aimee Light, talking about "inter-religious" versus "inter-faith." As Josh and I thought and talked about it in 2008, we landed on "inter-religious" because some of the traditions we were looking at and thinking about might not group themselves in the category of "faith," and the word "religious" also felt more academic--and dialogue was really what we were doing. I don't think the idea of interreligious studies per se even entered my mind until a couple of years later.

We can get even more granular and think about the fact that we hyphenate "inter-religious" in the journal title, and increasingly, that word isn't hyphenated anymore, and interfaith isn't either. That's just a nice tracking of the way language works: As we get used to ideas, we're more comfortable seeing them represented with their own word.

Later on, we became a part of CIRCLE [the Center for Inter-Religious & Communal Leadership

and Education, a joint project of Hebrew College and Andover Newton Theological Seminary], working with its co-directors Jenny, Or, and eventually Celene, and other people who have been really instrumental in making a space in the academy for this to be a known and clearly-stated discipline and area of work. And that area has been increasingly known as the field of interreligious (and sometimes interfaith) studies, which eventually was reflected in our name change.

The Journal had already been independently growing and shifting focus. When we came to CIRCLE in 2012, it was about the same time that this idea of naming the field, and making a space for it in the American Academy of Religion, was happening. So we took the opportunity to rebrand, refresh, and renew the Journal with a new and clearer name: The Journal of Interreligious Studies.

JENNY: I think we were explicitly tying it in with the new group at the American Academy of Religion, with the idea that the term “studies”—as in “ecumenical studies” and “feminist studies”—is often (especially when a field is new and emerging) a kind of broad umbrella for a number of different approaches to a topic.

Dialogue is a sub-category of interreligious engagement, of the kind of work one might do under the auspices of interreligious studies. But we wanted to cast a broader net, to catch the different ways people were talking about and doing this work that might bridge the interfaith movement and the academic study of it. So that was another part of the motivation.

I remember Josh, Or, and I having a very heated and passionate conversation in Or’s office about the words “interreligious” versus “interfaith.” Because I came out of the interfaith movement, that word was very near and dear to my heart, and we went back and forth a lot in a wonderful way that ended up resulting in my using both words in the title of the new academic group I cofounded at the AAR, to give a broad invitation to people who might identify their work in different ways.

JOSH: I think one of the funny things is that we could still continue that debate. For example, I could jump in and say, “By the way, it’s ‘interreligious,’ just for the record.” [Laughter] It’s an enduring place of healthy, constructive tension.

JENNY: You’re right—but to be honest, I think it will fizzle out in the next five years. Part of building a field is settling on some of the language, and really, it’s sort of an intellectual democracy at work. Somebody comes up with an articulation that wins people over, and more and more, they’ll start saying, “Oh, interreligious means this, and interfaith means that, and this is why I’m using this term.”

STEPHANIE: Honestly, I think I’m squarely in the interfaith camp now.

When I was younger, with linguistics and grammar, I was a prescriptivist. I felt like, “This is the way it works in English.” And now that I’m older, and I’ve experienced more languages, and more human nature, I’m a descriptivist. I’m more likely to say, “Oh, this is what we do to make language work for us.” Tracking the word with a linguistic, developmental psychologist, and

teacher lens, I think that “interfaith” is more accessible for many reasons: It’s shorter, it’s easier to say, and there are lots of college programs that use that word. So I think that’s where I’ve landed.

A related, important footnote here is the work of Chris Stedman, and other atheists, secular humanists, agnostics, and “faitheists” (the title of Chris’s book). For some of them, particularly people younger than me, the word “interfaith” has a currency that “interreligious” doesn’t. If we look at the data from the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) from the last couple of years, 51 percent of their alumni/ae polled reported that they identify as agnostic, humanist, or spiritual--but not religious.

That is the growing face of the interfaith movement, and I think that when Chris and others use the word “faitheist”—combining “faith” and “atheist”—that provides a little linguistic tickle that makes “interfaith” more accessible to that particular audience.

SUE:: So, on one hand, “interfaith” felt not quite as inclusive, because some religious traditions aren’t best described as a “faith.” But on the other hand, for people who don’t identify with a religious tradition, “faith,” and “interfaith” are more open words that let people who are relating to issues of belief and purpose consider themselves under that umbrella.

STEPHANIE: Well, at least as it has turned out in the past five or six years.

## PART II: INSTITUTIONS AND STATE OF FORMATION

SUE: Is there anything important about the early years of the Journal that we haven’t talked about?

STEPHANIE: I think we should acknowledge the fact that we had some key support early on, at first from an anonymous gift, and then financial and institutional support from Auburn Theological Seminary.

JOSH: Yes--we got an anonymous gift of about \$10,000 from within the Jewish community where I grew up to get us started. Without that, we really would have had a tough time launching, in terms of designing a website and making things come together in the way that they did. That was tremendously important.

We also had the support of the Interfaith Youth Core. They served as our fiscal agent from the beginning, so we could process the anonymous donation and bring the Journal to life. They also gave us a lot of mentoring and guidance in the practical elements of running an organization, because Stephanie and I had never supervised a staff before. It was kind of ridiculous, really--I was 22, and Stephanie and I were working with and supervising a staff of several people fairly quickly. Fortunately, IFYC really helped us with HR and other management aspects of starting the Journal. From there, we found a longer-term home at Auburn, and they were tremendously helpful; Rabbi Justus Baird was singular. They taught us about fundraising and networking, and we made some really important connections there. And then we found our way to CIRCLE, the long-term and very happy home for the Journal. We

have been so blessed. If there's an enduring lesson of the Journal, it's that collaboration and partnerships are key. If Stephanie and I had tried to just do this on our own, it could not have happened. And when you're trying to support and cultivate a whole field of study, it almost definitionally can't happen alone.

SUE: Before we get to CIRCLE, who were the various staff members and what did they do at the Journal?

JOSH: In addition to Aimee Light—a brilliant theologian at Duquesne University who continues to serve on the JIRS Board—we also had: Stephen Butler Murray, now the president of a seminary in Detroit; Sophia Khan, now a writer, filmmaker, and activist; Matt Dougherty, a PhD candidate in religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Kate Fridkis, a writer and activist; Karen Leslie Hernandez, a scholar at the University of Rhode Island; and Michael C. M. Woolf, a ThD candidate at Harvard.

STEPHANIE: And in the early days of SoF, in addition to Chris Stedman, we also had Ian Burzynski, who now runs an NGO working to help students and schools in Bangladesh; Tim Brauhn, with the Islamic Networks Group; and Honna Eichler George, who does development at the Society of Women Engineers in Chicago.

These are the people who over the years were involved in editing, web support and development, technological support and development, brainstorming and planning, and eventually building State of Formation as well. When I stop and think about these early voices, these essential staff members, it's amazing to note what they are doing now and to think about the legacy of their work in building the two projects.

SUE: I get the sense that there was a great feeling of a collectivity--although I know that people were paid nominally and had specific roles--with you two master-minding and coordinating the whole thing. Is that a fair description?

JOSH: I think there was a sense of collective responsibility and shared dream. People felt like they were plugging into something bigger than themselves, and something that could make an enduring difference. And yes, I would say that our incredibly nominal salaries were not a big draw. But the sense of purpose was.

STEPHANIE: And we did function as a staff. There were weekly staff calls and twice-a-year staff evaluations; there was professional development taking place. People had defined roles, and were trying to get their specific tasks done--but there was definitely a sense for everyone that this is a new project, I'm excited to be participating in it, and I'm going to lend my expertise to make it happen.

SUE: Let's transition now, and actually talk about the transition. Things were very vibrant and you had a happy home at Auburn. Stephanie and Josh, what led you to approach CIRCLE to house, sponsor, and supervise the Journal? Jenny and Or, what led you to want to take this on? How did that partnership begin?

OR: On the CIRCLE side--observing the entrepreneurial work that Josh, Stephanie, and their peers had done; taking note of the growth of this nascent field of interreligious or interfaith studies; seeing that there was a space for an online forum in which the theories and practices of this field were both important--we felt like there was an opportunity to bring together both people and energies in a synergistic way.

At the root of that arrangement were the personal relationships that we had developed with Josh and Stephanie, whom we met through the Interfaith Youth Core. Through a series of conversations, we decided collectively that this was an arrangement that we felt would be constructive, both for Hebrew College and Andover Newton, and for the Journal.

The hope was that we could build on the founders' energy and help to create sustainability by institutionalizing the Journal and State of Formation within the framework of CIRCLE. That was the major impetus. Of course, in the process we had to sort out from each side how things would be different--even if we agreed that this change was productive--because every change brings with it some loss, and that needed to be processed.

STEPHANIE: I will add that initially, I was really hesitant about moving again. I'm not from the East Coast; New York and Boston felt very foreign, and at times hostile to me. Auburn at least had been right near Union, where I lived—I could see it from my dorm; that little corner of the Upper West Side was like my nest. There were weeks when I didn't leave that block. I'm also much more resistant to change than Josh. The idea of being housed at two unfamiliar places, in Boston—far away in another city--seemed like it was going to be more cumbersome.

But the particular detail that, at the time, there were two CIRCLE co-directors, Jewish and Christian, a man and woman--that was very familiar. I felt like, "There's another pair like us out there doing this work--they're very different, and we're very different." The fact that each pair had differences in how they navigate things actually made me feel reassured; there was a familiarity there that made it more possible to entertain the notion of moving. It was also clear that Jenny and Or had a personal commitment to collaboration, and a personal love and joy in working closely with people, that were necessary ingredients in their faith work, and that felt comfortable, welcoming, and safe.

SUE: So what was the motivation for thinking of moving at all?

STEPHANIE: Our memos of understanding with Auburn were one year at a time, and when we started at Auburn, Josh and I didn't want to give away any control. We thought we just needed a few things--a fiscal agent, an office, and a little bit of mentoring... We essentially felt: This is ours. We don't need a lot of help. We can do this. But I think one effect of our relationship with Auburn was starting to grow up a little bit, and to think to ourselves, well, we could actually use a lot more institutional support. We would like to be in a place where we would have more ongoing, daily, systematic interactions with other collaborators. Auburn had been great: they gave us space and support when we needed it, but they were also happy to let us just be. And we weren't part of the systematic, daily, weekly, and monthly life of the organization, because we didn't want to be.

So, as we were still doing the year-by-year MOUs, we were very much continuing to wonder: Is

this what we want? Is this what we need? And we started looking for someplace to be more substantially and systematically involved with other collaborators.

JOSH: I think there were a few different elements. CIRCLE and the Journal had such obvious mission alignment. Auburn had just shifted around a number of staff members and sharpened its strategic focus to be somewhat less academic and a bit more focused on the public interfaith discourse. And though that's a really important conversation to be in, it felt different from what we were doing. Also, we trusted Jenny and Or, and we were excited about the possibility of working with them in a lot of different ways. With Or and Jenny, we felt like we had, in Jewish language, two *havrutas*—two pairings of beloved professional colleagues who'd been doing this work together, arguing, debating, and wrestling with all of the important issues that come up.

I think the resonance that Stephanie suggested is right on target--we felt that we would have really important and wonderful partners in dialogue internally, which would then translate into meaningful, helpful, and beautiful--if challenging--dialogue externally.

SUE: It really does sound like a great fit; I think you should make the move! [Laughter] Let's look at another aspect of the Journal's growth and reach. We really haven't talked about State of Formation (SOF) at all. Although our focus in this conversation is mainly on the history of the Journal, I want to invite all of you to talk a bit about the impetus for SOF, its sister publication; its early relationship to the Journal; and the development of that relationship between the two projects.

JOSH: I remember very vividly its beginnings: After a day at Mt. Sinai Hospital as a chaplain intern, I walked into Central Park with my phone and had an amazing conference call with Stephanie, Chris Stedman from the Interfaith Youth Core, and Matthew Black from the Council for the Parliament of World's Religions--debating and discussing and opening the possibility for a new publication. We were trying to figure out what a forum would look like, for seminary students like us and clergy just getting started in the field, to do active and ongoing reflections, blogging about what it was like to be stepping as leaders into the world's most religiously diverse society.

We wanted to capture the personal angle—to get something a little more popular out there that was connective and story-oriented, and could help us raise up a whole cohort of leaders dedicated to interfaith practice and interfaith learning, telling the story of what that meant. Chris came up with the name “State of Formation,” and then we gradually put it together: We designed the website and put out a call for State of Formation scholars, and we got a large initial cohort.

In a funny and maybe surprising way, State of Formation may have more people reading it than the Journal itself, but we felt that together they created a healthy and happy ecosystem: if you want something quick, easy, and popular, great--go to State of Formation. If you want something deeper and more analytical, and more rigorously academic, go to the Journal. We felt that many of our SOF scholars were emerging leaders and would really be excited about what the Journal had to offer, and likewise, that a lot of the readers of the Journal would be quite interested to hear the narratives, thoughts, and reflections of our young scholars in State of Formation.



It was an early and quick success, but it also took a fair amount of work, because there was ongoing content to solicit and edit. One of the interesting things happening in parallel was that Chris, who initially managed and edited SOF, was going from being Chris Stedman, random guy at the Interfaith Youth Core, to Chris Stedman, TV personality and author. So one of the interesting meta-narratives was of Chris's emergence as a scholar and practitioner in the field. After about a year, he had to transition out of SOF; he just found himself overwhelmed. But there was kind of a beauty to the arc of his career and how it was working in parallel with the arc of the project that he helped to envision and launch.

JENNY: One thing that you sparked for me, Josh, is that I think there's a balance between the energy of younger scholars and activists and the stability of the institutional partnerships that you forged with us that creates, at its best, a really good dynamic. So when Chris needed to go off and pursue some other things, State of Formation didn't disappear because it had from the start an institutional home.

There was a lovely sense that there was somewhere for all these brilliant, creative folks to go with their great ideas, which would allow both some freedom and flexibility as their own vocational trajectories emerged, and some institutional continuity in which the publication could continue to flow.

STEPHANIE: I want to point out the fact that Hebrew College, Andover Newton, and Jenny and Or facilitated all of us coming to Newton, and staying overnight there, eating there, and praying there, and meeting with the leadership there. That really is an example of how important institutional support and even actual space can be. There were nearly 25 people there, and Jenny and Or invited Diana Eck to come meet with us.

If that in-person meeting hadn't happened, I don't think SOF would have so quickly become fruitful, rich, and full of possibility. And I think if you look at the people who were there at that retreat, and where they are now, it's pretty amazing. That's the power of CIRCLE, of Jenny and Or, of institutions, of dorms and food and face-to-face time—the power of institutional support and commitment. It made a huge difference.

OR: I want to add that, from the perspective of our respective institutions, part of what made good sense about SOF is that we had already been working with student fellows on our campuses, and that became a central element of the work of CIRCLE. This represented an opportunity to help mentor and engage with a wider group of creative and entrepreneurial students who were interested in advancing this field on a national level. So it felt like it was very much in keeping with the existing mission of CIRCLE, and it gave us an opportunity to think broadly about the development of this field among emerging leaders on a larger scale.

The relationship of CIRCLE both with the Journal and with State of Formation represented what we thought was not mission creep, but rather an extension of the vision we were developing. We also recognize that the opportunity to mentor, work with, and learn from a cohort of emerging, religious leaders would allow us to be involved in conversations on a somewhat broader level and would bring new energy to the work that we were doing locally.

PART III: MISSION AND VISION

SUE: Let me pick up on the subject of mission as we get back to talking about the Journal itself. What can you say about anything that might loosely go along with “mission” – direction, focus, any of those kinds of things – that might reflect conversations and even disagreements about what the Journal might focus on and how? I’d like to invite our readers into any of those conversations, and even conflicts, about what the Journal is, what it is doing, and what it should be doing.

JENNY: One thing that happened is that, while Josh and Stephanie were very autonomous when they were at Auburn, over the years we have gone back and forth about how much oversight and involvement the CIRCLE co-directors actually should have with either publication. The question of how to strike a balance between oversight and autonomy is, I think, an ongoing and open question, and something that—even each of us as co-directors—may have different feelings about at different times.

One thing that we did fairly soon after the transition of the Journal to being housed at CIRCLE was to take a look at the call for submissions, which had previously been a very open process. Josh and Stephanie did a lot of work to get out a broad call, to encourage lots of good submissions on a range of topics. From this open call model we moved to a pattern of three issues each year: one focused on papers coming out of the American Academy of Religion’s “Interreligious and Interfaith studies” group, one focused on highlighting a particular organization or center that does this work, and inviting someone from that organization to curate the issue, and a third issue each year that retains an open call format.

This cycle is still fairly new, and it marks more active involvement and engagement by the CIRCLE co-directors. Sue, when you came on board, it marked the first time someone who wasn’t part of the founding vision for the Journal or its relationship with CIRCLE took on a key leadership role. This is allowing us to look at everything again with your fresh eyes.

SUE: In terms of content: How have you each and together thought about, and even disagreed about or wrestled with, a vision for what should actually be in the Journal--what should be happening in its pages, what kinds of things we should be publishing, what the purpose is of the Journal and—let me add something new here—how it relates to the field of interreligious studies.

STEPHANIE: A common thread in our shared sense of mission has been an emphasis on learning and education—a belief that what we’re doing actually transforms people’s lives and communities. We’ve always published articles that were theoretical, more cerebral or abstract, because that’s part of an academic field, but whenever we talked about a call for submission, or about outreach, whenever we were weighing whether or not an individual submission was worthy of publishing, I think we’ve always tried to land on the side of increasing inclusivity and accessibility.

There was a period of time where some of the articles we were publishing weren’t as rigorous or as robust as they could have been. Sometimes that was because we were trying to reach out to people who weren’t in academia. We had a submission from a woman who was a quilter, and

she had an interfaith quilt and wanted to submit a piece about it. Many academic, peer-reviewed publications wouldn't even open that e-mail--that's not how things get done, it's not what their people expect to read, right? Except, clearly this woman is doing interfaith work, and clearly she's amplifying the voices of members of her community, and clearly there's something here that is worth highlighting and sharing in some way.

So sometimes we really struggle with those kinds of submissions, or similarly, submissions from a small region in India or Malaysia, or a small African university. We'd think, well, clearly we should work with this person; we should see what they have to say, because we were always landing on the side of, "Yes. Open the door. Keep it open. Open it wider."

But the flip side is that if you're a reader, or a board member, or a faculty person looking to use our Journal in your courses, you might end up looking at those submissions and think, "Well, this is not as rigorous as I would expect from a peer-reviewed publication" or "Why is this in an academic journal?" That's a tension that we've had to name, talk about, and navigate. We're still working on it, but commitment to actual education and learning at all levels is a really strong strand in our mission.

CELENE: I think what Stephanie is capturing here is the line or balance between a commitment to building interreligious engagement at the grassroots and the commitment that the Journal has to thinking rigorously, theologically, academically, and historically about different modes of inter-religious engagement. It reflects both the practitioner and academic dimensions; it has both the grassroots and ivy tower dimensions. It's a hybrid in many ways.

OR: One way of thinking about this, which I think complements the other comments thus far, is that we hope we're cultivating a forum in which the theory and practice of interreligious studies is articulated thoughtfully, and in ways that will help inform different groups of people, including academics, organizational leaders, graduate students, and teachers, among others.

We recognize that in the last decade there has been a swell of interest, both on a popular grassroots level and within academic circles, in the question of people of different religious communities engaging--especially in the US context, which is highly diverse, and in a global context in which we are now interacting in ways we could have never imagined even a decade ago.

How do we begin to create a language and a discourse about those complexities and the opportunities for transformation intellectually, ethically, spiritually, and emotionally? That is another question, I think, at the heart of the Journal's work.

SUE: I wonder if there's been any ambivalence around this for those of you who are more situated in academia; on one hand, we're trying to make this the online journal of record for interreligious studies, and yet we also have this wide vision of inclusivity, of practitioner focus, of wanting to open the doors and widen the walls, How does that duality--or that two-pronged approach--play out for those of you especially committed to the academic positioning of the Journal, and even your own positions in academia?

JENNY: From my perspective, it's not so much of a tension as just an ongoing question. The Journal is evolving, and I think it has choices to make as it evolves. It goes back to Josh's and Stephanie's original vision for the Journal. What was the niche? Where was there a gap? With what were they trying to fill it? And how is that gap shifting? Does the Journal want to evolve with those changing needs?

There's a lot of potential in the Journal becoming the go-to place for people doing interreligious studies, as the new group within the AAR has added that language to the lexicon of academic circles. I think there's simply an increasing need for that, whether it's the Journal, or other multiple publications. In many ways, *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* is still the premier academic peer-reviewed journal in the field. I think having *State of Formation* as a companion publication takes a little of the pressure off the *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* in terms of having to be an "everything for everyone" sort of space. It was a great idea to create that second publication because it allows for that wide, wide door.

And then there is the development of the discourse, as the field continues to emerge. When the Journal was first formed, there weren't academic scholars who identified with the field of interreligious studies who could write scholarly articles in the same way. That's also continuing to emerge. So, again, for me it's not so much a tension, as an ongoing question we'll continue to answer together.

CELENE: Another aspect of that ongoing question takes us back to the question of language and terminology. The original title, with "inter-religious dialogue," stressed more the practitioner element; even just changing the name to "inter-religious studies" shifted much more to academic and analytic language. That can include reflection on best practices around dialogue, but it's certainly much broader because it's also about interreligious encounter, sometimes in ways that aren't deliberate in the ways that dialogue sets out to be. "Inter-religious studies" also includes the many ways in which different religious communities spontaneously bump up against one another, sometimes contentiously, sometimes collaboratively. The shift in language in the field, I think, has also helped to mainstream this area of inquiry into other branches of the social sciences and the humanities. "Studies" rather than "dialogue" broadens the context. The phrase "interreligious dialogue" evokes for me the image of heads of religious communities coming together in a public forum, and that's only one way in which dialogue or interreligious encounter occurs, and it's maybe not even the most important one.

JENNY: Right--there's much more dynamism that I think we as practitioners in this field see than just what takes place in formal, institutionally organized dialogues. The word "dialogue" seems to privilege deliberate encounters, and may suggest a sort of rarified institutional encounter at a certain elite level that's carefully cultivated.

But I want to note before we define "dialogue" too narrowly, that people like Len Swidler use it as a broad umbrella term. He talks about dialogue of the head, of the heart, and of the hand. Language gets proposed, and debated, and settled, and unsettled. But there are many people who use the term "dialogue" as broadly as we're trying to use the word "studies."

OR: I think it's also important to note that Celene's coming on as a co-director in 2014 has been

important for the Journal's broad vision in a different way, both in terms of her own expertise in Islamic thought and practice, and her ability to connect us to people in the Muslim world who are practitioners and scholars of the interreligious encounter.

CELENE: I would also note, as we're talking about varieties of perspectives on and in the Journal, our recognition of the importance of the involvement of area experts, including but not only in our review process. In building out the board and in our other collaborations, we want to make sure that as we're thinking about the intersection points between different religious, ethical, and philosophical traditions, we're also doing due diligence with respect to the accuracy and authenticity of the portrayals.

SUE: One of the things that we've noted over time, even in my short tenure with the Journal, is both the need to keep expanding our panel of experts and reviewers to make sure that we're vetting content properly, as Celene noted, but also to be getting a wider range of voices represented in the pages of the Journal itself. With that as one example, I'd like to finish up our conversation by inviting you to reflect on what you see as other growing edges for the Journal, not only challenges and opportunities, but places where we need to push ourselves.

JOSH: One thing we need to do is to think carefully about the role of our board of scholars and practitioners, and how to make further use of the exceptional talents and expertise of that group. That's not a simple question, given the fact that the Journal is housed in one particular location with a board that is national in scope, and a board that is consciously constituted of people from different areas within interreligious studies and the interfaith movement, both academic and organizational.

STEPHANIE: Thinking about the board and the voices captured in the pages--it has been perennially difficult to include the voices of women, of people of color, and of those in lower socioeconomic classes. And that's true for State of Formation, as well. Often when we've been thinking about themed issues, or outreach, or how to grow the board, or who submits articles to us, this is something we keep grappling with; it's a challenge in the wider field as well.

One problem is that a lot of writers don't necessarily know or self-identify their own work as interreligious. I see a lot of articles or scholars, and think, "Oh, they could totally publish in the Journal," and they don't necessarily see their own work as fitting there. I often wished that I had ten hours a week just to devote to reaching out to writers and potential board members. That's definitely been a challenge, and a place where we haven't really succeeded yet. It's hard, because people that we do know who could be board members, because they're in previously underrepresented groups, may also be overcommitted and representing in too many places.

We need younger people who are in the field. And there's also the important question of economic access. This is a hard field for a poor person, or a first-generation college graduate, or a brand new faculty person to participate in because it's seen as optional; if you're trying to build your career or pay back student loans, how are you going to find the time to participate? We may need to think systemically about the ways in which exploring interfaith issues and religious diversity is, or is perceived as, a luxury.

JENNY: The area of growth that I would invite us to continue thinking about is to what extent

will the Journal continue to respond to a genuine need, and how will we continue to keep it relevant and dynamic as this emerging area continues to shift, grow, and change in so many ways.

CELENE: For me, one primary challenge is our reach. We have about 40,000 in annual readership. It's a good start, but boosting those numbers is going to be important to get more visibility.

JOSH: Probably every year of our existence as a journal, as far as I can remember, we have felt like we were at an inflection point where there was going to be something new, or some big change, or a new addition, or a weaving together of what we're doing. We're still at it, and that's the reason we've been able to grow and change and be dynamic--we're always at that inflection point. So I'm excited to see what emerges, what grows, and what shifts.

It could be that more is better, and that we need another forum altogether. It could be that this is a year of further integration into the AAR. I'm kind of curious about the "how," not just the "what." I think reaching more people, integrating into other fields of study and connecting with them...there are so many things we can do and so many ways we can do them, and the "how" is the piece that I'm excited to hear about, because to me, therein lies the real innovation.

OR: For me, one of the core strengths of the Journal to date has been our collaborative model. While we are facing significant institutional changes at Hebrew College and Andover Newton, the dialogical spirit at the heart of this enterprise will continue to animate our work as we move forward.

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