

Interreligious Education and US Rabbinical Schools Response to Or N. Rose

By Nancy Fuchs Kreimer

Or Rose has done a wonderful job of laying out both the challenges and the benefits of serious attention to multifaith learning in the training of rabbis. I concur with his analysis, and admire the pathbreaking work he and his colleagues have done in the last decade through CIRCLE. I continue to learn from Or and Jennie, and I am grateful for the wisdom, energy and imagination they have brought to this emerging field of interreligious seminary education. In this brief response, I will add some of the experiences my colleagues and I have had through the Multifaith Studies and Initiatives Program at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. I agree with Or that “There is a limited body of scholarly literature on interreligious education in general, and for religious leadership development specifically.” I believe all of us will grow through further experiments, longitudinal studies and attention to the creation of a language of discourse for this work.

As Or points out, the issue of time in the curriculum is a serious one for rabbinical training. As in the other non-Orthodox schools, students at RRC often need to spend time developing basic language and classical text skills. Fortunately, we have not had to fit our Multifaith courses into an already full curriculum. Since the late 1980’s, candidates for the rabbinate have been required to take two full semester courses in our department, one of them in the area of Christianity. This past academic year, the faculty completed a major revision of RRC’s curriculum. Not only did the faculty confirm the Christianity requirement—in a slightly revised form—it has added a requirement that students demonstrate basic knowledge of Islam and Muslim Americans. This was a big decision. The faculty clearly agreed with Or that, as he put it so well, “the need to learn about Islam is intensified” in the situation we find ourselves in today as Jews, both in Israel and in diaspora. We believe we are the first rabbinical school to have such a hefty requirement. Clearly, our faculty affirms Or’s argument that Jewish seminary interreligious education should begin with grounding in knowledge about Christianity and Islam. I also share Or’s sense that “learning with” rather than just “learning about” is of great value to our students’ formation as religious leaders. Finally, I want our courses to include practicing the very competencies we hope to see them put into use as rabbis in the field. A hefty order, indeed!

At the core of our current program are two courses: “Jewish-Christian Encounter through Text” (a hevrotah course offered alternate years with a Main Line Protestant and Evangelic seminary) and “Muslims in America”(a course that includes pairing with a Muslim graduate student from Penn with whom our students create and execute a session about Islam in a Jewish venue.) We have offered both these courses multiple times, learning and improving with each iteration. Melissa Heller has written about the Christian Encounter course, and I have written about the course on Muslims

In RRC’s new curriculum(phased in over several years) these courses will continue to be offered, but they will now have a prerequisite. In order to benefit from the skills and relationship building offered by these experiences, students need a foundation of basic information about Christianity or Islam. We are working on developing on line methods to prepare and test students for this kind of knowledge so that the courses themselves can focus on deeper immersion in the work itself.

Even with the requirements in place, we are well aware of the competing challenges facing our students and are constantly developing, exploring and testing new ways to provide them with opportunities for multifaith learning. While we offer courses that just seem exciting, such as “Arabic for Interfaith Engagment” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttGTsSbZT38>), we realize that our most successful courses are ones that bring together other parts of our curriculum. When possible, we try to teach our skills in conjunction with the other aspects of our students’ formation as rabbis.

For example, this January, we are offering an intensive course entitled Rabbis as Peace Builders, co-taught by Rabbi Daniel Roth of the Pardes Institute Center for Conflict Resolution and Rabbi Amy Eilberg, author of *From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace*. The course will provide important training for interfaith work and, at the same time, include Talmudic text study and more general pastoral skills. While these teachers are in Philadelphia, we will also offer a multifaith workshop that will bring religious leaders of other faiths to RRC to learn along with our students in a day long version of “Rabbi as Peace Builder.”

Similarly, because our students come to us with a healthy interest in issues of social justice, we have included in our Multifaith offerings a variety of courses with a focus on contemporary issues such as “Multifaith Food Justice” and “Incarceration: Pastoral and Political Issues.”

We also seek ways to expand the students’ interfaith experiences while working within existing requirements. For example, we require our students to spend forty hours “shadowing” a rabbi or several rabbis, to gain an appreciation of the challenges of practice in the field. This year, we developed an option for students to spend three of those hours in the company of one of three carefully selected Christian clergy in the area.

What is the value of immersive experiences such as retreats over against less intense, more long-term opportunities for connection? I am not sure, but we continue to try both. In close collaboration with Or, RRC created its own signature immersive program, a four day residential retreat for Muslim and Jewish Emerging Religious Leaders. This past June, we completed our fourth retreat and have just finished working with an organizational consultant to evaluate the program through interviews and surveys of our first 50 alumni. Our most recent retreat was an experiment—a program for women leaders only. I have served on the faculty of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore week long intensive program for Jewish and Christian seminarians; RRC students can fulfill a portion of their Multifaith requirement by participating.

A question that remains salient for me: What is gained by programs that focus on just one relationship(e.g. Jewish-Muslim, Jewish-Christian) as opposed to gatherings with multiple traditions represented? We have been blessed by two years of energetic student leadership, spearheaded at RRC, in creating PERL, Philadelphia Emerging Religious Leaders. (<http://www.stateofformation.org/2014/08/growing-a-string-of-perls-a-report-from-the-first-year-of-philadelphia-emerging-religious-leaders-part-i/>) PERL has emerged as a model for other cities, with three program areas, partnerships with several seminaries and interfaith organizations, and a successful training for over thirty emerging religious leaders in the skills of interfaith dialogue. Unlike other RRC programs that have aimed for depth rather than breadth(our course offerings, our Muslim-Jewish retreats), the PERL program is fully multifaith, casting a broad net across the religious landscape of Philadelphia. . The group chose to work with Philadelphians Organizing to Witness Empower and Renew(POWER) a Faith-

Based Community Organizing group. As organizer Josh Weisman wrote, “ We visited the Gurdwara of one of our members, the Shabbat table of another, had one-to-one conversations, talked theology and social justice, and planned and ran many meetings together.”

In closing, let me add several more questions to the excellent ones Or has posed. Is there a need for interfaith opportunities for women or for men only? What special training can we offer our future campus religious professionals? How can we prepare our American religious leaders-- Jews, Christians and Muslims –to become courageous peace builders, moving beyond the polarization (especially with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) that threatens to divide our own communities and our interfaith efforts? In short, I find myself in accord with what Or has written and look forward to the opportunity to continue exploring these questions and more together.