

# **Essential Ingredients for Multifaith Education in a University Setting: Response to *Interreligious Education & the American Jewish Seminary***

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Gone are the days when effective interfaith engagement came from two theologians sharing a stage, agreeing to agree on how religions must become more pluralistic. The needs and methodologies have shifted, and new approaches must be outlined. Rabbi Or N. Rose makes a powerful case for Interreligious Education as a critical component of Jewish seminary education and suggests a framework for its implementation. Rabbi Rose's proposal is at once creative in its expression and consistent with the most successful interfaith initiatives emerging globally.

Our experience at New York University, the largest and one of the most diverse private universities in the United States, echoes with that of Rabbi Rose's approach. The purpose of this essay is to argue that one ought not diverge far from Rabbi Rose's model when applying interfaith training to a diverse undergraduate population such as the one at NYU.

Over the past decade, NYU has committed significant attention to building a robust model. Its strides included the induction of chaplains and their inclusion in commencement ceremonies, the dedication of a state-of-the-art and centrally located facility as a "Center for Spiritual Life", and perhaps, most boldly, the establishment of an academic minor in Multifaith and Spiritual Leadership. Recognizing the potential this complex of resources could play within the public life of New York City and the U.S. more broadly, NYU established the Of Many Institute for Multifaith Leadership to achieve its goals in engaging the public. Its founding advisory board chairs, Chelsea Clinton and Dr. Linda Mills, respectively produced and directed a documentary which shares the name of the Institute, 'Of Many', enabling its narrative and principles to spread to even broader audiences.

The Institute directors and founders - in consultation with experts in the field and cohorts of student leaders - developed six key principles of multifaith engagement that underlie its mission and vision. Many of these principles align with Rabbi Rose's suggestions for building effective interreligious education in the seminary setting, indicating a growing consensus around a vision for the field of multifaith education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As we elaborate on these principles, the overlap with Rabbi Rose's framework is evident.

## **Background**

The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the ensuing ten years of rising religious hostilities on a global level<sup>1</sup> highlighted the desperate need in this country for nuanced public discussions guided by well-informed multifaith leaders dedicated to building bridges and promoting peace and coexistence. Far too few of these leaders emerged and even fewer institutions of higher education were equipped to truly support such conversations. The result was widespread misunderstanding, divisiveness, and, at times, outright hostility between faith groups on college campuses nationwide.

This disruptive tension hinders feelings of safety for students and undermines the opportunity for the benefits that come with having diverse relationships, including enhanced academic achievement (Higher Education Research Institute, 2004), greater maturity (Parks, 2005), and the development of an ecumenical worldview (Mayhew, 2011). Additionally,

responses to religious conflict on the university level frequently focus on crisis-response rather than on campus-wide relationship building and institutional transformation. As a result, institutions miss the opportunity to develop new peacemakers from among a group of young people who are at a critical stage in their moral development.

The Of Many Institute for Multifaith Leadership at NYU's was created to address this need. Its mission is to inspire, educate and train the next generation of spiritual, religious and secular leaders to meet the growing complexities of their communities and the world in the 21st Century.

### **Six Principles for Multifaith Engagement on College Campuses**

The 'Of Many' Institute's six principles for multifaith engagement drive the Institute's work and reflect its values. As Rabbi Rose writes, it is crucial to "think carefully about the *goals* of interreligious engagement"<sup>2</sup> before embarking upon programming or curriculum development. Each of the following principles reflect that careful thought and have contributed greatly to the Institute's success.

*1. Multifaith Leadership should reflect diversity, accounting for the complex and intersectional identities of our constituents.*

All of us live at the intersection of multiple identities that affect our power and privilege in society, our practice of religion, and how we see the other. The Institute's classes and programs try to illuminate these intersections and complexities using critical race theory and techniques borrowed from the successful Intergroup Dialogue pedagogy.<sup>3</sup>

*2. Multifaith Leadership should be rooted in face-to-face encounters and deep relationship-building within and between communities and/or individuals.*

As Rabbi Rose notes, "The deeper one's relationship is with leaders and key stakeholders from other communities...it is also more likely that the leaders will be able to work together productively to solve problems."<sup>4</sup> The Institute incorporates relationship building – grounded in mutual vulnerability and shared values – into every aspect of its work. Bridges, the award-winning Muslim-Jewish dialogue group at NYU housed under the Institute sponsors a yearly event in which both faith groups attend the other's Friday worship service and then eat dinner together. The event sells out each year, with over 280 students in attendance. Inspired by Bridges' success, last year a group of Muslim and Christian students created MuCh: Muslim-Christian Dialogue at NYU – a sustained group of Muslim and Christian students who get together monthly to study each other's sacred text and discuss similarities and differences. Bridges and MuCh are just two examples of initiatives that allow students time to build real friendships across lines of difference, echoing Rabbi Rose's recommendation for longer term initiatives over one-time or short term encounters.<sup>5</sup>

*3. Multifaith engagement should be committed to social transformation and civic engagement.*

When working together on social transformation efforts such as rebuilding a disaster area or organizing a multifaith campaign against sex trafficking, students have the ability to connect with people of other faiths through a lens of shared values and a common sense of purpose. Additionally, as Rabbi Rose suggests with relationship to seminary students in their clinical pastoral care training, socially-engaged multifaith work is an effective way for students to build and flex their leadership muscles out of the classroom and in the field. In addition to its

regular calendar of multifaith service efforts, Of Many is launching a fellowship program in 2015 specifically designed to foster a cohort of young people to learn critical multifaith leadership competencies in an educational and professional settings. Fellows will gather for bi-weekly discussion-based learning sessions coordinated by the Institute as well as work at paid part-time internships at multifaith social justice institutions in New York City.

*4. Multifaith work should be focused on introspection and meaning-making as a way of understanding spirituality.*

Several national research studies over the past decade have shown a marked increase in the number of students seeking spiritual reflection as a part of their university experience. A national study of over 100,000 college students in 2007 conducted by UCLA researchers found that a rise among students who said “attaining inner harmony” and “integrating spirituality in my life” were “very important” or “essential” life goals. Over 80% of respondents articulated an interest in spirituality, with 76% interested in a “search for meaning” or “purpose in life.”<sup>6</sup>

The Institute tried to provide safe spaces for students to grapple with these questions of personal faith and spirituality that tend to arise as they deepen their relationships with friends of other religious backgrounds. Personal reflections are built into the Institute’s coursework (see below, #6), trainings, and many of its events and programming.

*5. Multifaith work should be inclusive of and attentive to personal narratives through intentional storytelling pedagogy.*

Throughout the various platforms created for interfaith engagement, students learn both how to tell their own story so that others can listen, as well as listen so that others will tell their story. They become cognizant of how making themselves vulnerable to others by sharing their own experiences can induce empathy and understanding. In an era where American college students decreasingly define their religious identities doctrinally (note the surge in “spiritual but not religious”), it makes sense not to limit the discourse to theological reflection, but to open it primarily to narratives on lived experience. Surprisingly, a true story will carry more authenticity – even authority – than doctrinal speculation.

*6. Multifaith work should be supportive of the integration of the whole student experience throughout their academic and co-curricular development.*

Although housed in NYU Student Affairs and primarily working at the co-curricular level, the Institute also supports the first academic minor in the country at any major secular research university in Multifaith and Spiritual Leadership. The minor, jointly housed in the Silver School of Social Work and the Wagner School of Public Service, provides students of all faith backgrounds (including those who are unaffiliated with a particular faith tradition) the opportunity to learn the theory and practice behind effective multifaith leadership. Coursework and co-curricular activities allow students weave multifaith engagement and leadership into all aspects of their lives, deepening their learning and strengthening their skill set to emerge in the world as effective multifaith leaders.

## **Conclusion**

Rabbi Rose’s thoughtful framework for the strategy and direction of the burgeoning multifaith leadership movement deftly addresses many of the same concerns and possibilities we examined in developing the Of Many Institute for Multifaith Leadership at NYU and the six

principles that underlie our work. As the field grows and deepens, we look forward to continuing to assess and study these different approaches and to share our findings with others.

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<sup>1</sup> See Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project: *Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High* (January 14, 2014) <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/#interactive>

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, p. 8

<sup>3</sup> See Islam, Steinwert and Swords, *3Dialogue in Action: Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Interfaith Education*, *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, Issue 13, Winter 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, p. 9

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, p. 4

<sup>6</sup> See The Higher Education Research Council's *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose*, UCLA, 2007.