

# Why Christian Seminaries Need Interreligious Education

By Jennifer Peace

## Interreligious education in US Christian Seminaries: Context and Content

Christian seminary education has many mandates – ministers are worship leaders, preachers, exegetes, historians, ethicists, evangelists, theologians, comforters, councilors and prophets. It is one of the last great generalist professions when you consider the range of competencies required. Beyond the content of seminary education, there is also the ever-changing context of seminary education. My colleagues outlined some contours of the multi-religious landscape in which rabbis and imams in the US are working today. This is the same religiously diverse context that our Christian seminary graduates are entering.

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the body charged with mapping out a detailed blueprint of the essential content for Christian seminary students is also concerned with context. As recently as June 2012 a new standard was introduced to encourage seminaries to consider (in their curricular decisions) the “multifaith and multicultural contexts” in which seminarians will live out their ministries.<sup>1</sup> While the standard leaves a wide margin for interpretation, by including an explicit reference to “multifaith” contexts this opens the door to an emerging mandate for interreligious education in Christian seminaries.

As a co-director and co-founder of CIRCLE and the first person to hold the title “assistant professor of interfaith studies” at Andover Newton Theological School, the question of why we need interfaith education and what should be included in this emerging field are ones I have both a professional and personal stake in taking up. The first acknowledgement is that these are questions none of us can answer alone. Not only do they require fellow educators from multiple religious contexts but they benefit from the growing and thoughtful cadre of academics, activists, and religious professionals taking up these questions in their own, churches, synagogues, mosques, monasteries, temples, and educational institutions. It is crucial that any agenda for interreligious education be developed in conversation with diverse religious constituencies so that we are not promoting a Christian-centric (or mono-religious) version of “what we need to know about religious others.” Interreligious education requires us to build jointly; shared goals, curricula, programs and courses. By jointly imagining a scope and sequence that serves the needs of multiple religious communities we can model in process and outcomes, a commitment to learning *with* (rather than about) each other.<sup>2</sup> This commitment to parity has been a cornerstone of CIRCLE’s model from our co-designed, jointly taught courses to our interfaith fellowship program which requires students to submit proposals in pairs, working across religious lines on projects that honor the needs of both.

I am keenly interested not only in how Andover Newton and Hebrew College understand interfaith education but also how this conversation is playing out on the national level in other seminaries (and colleges). Can we be part of a movement to shift the ethos and understanding of what constitutes well-prepared religious leaders for the multi-religious context of the US today? Making space for this conversation within academia is the primary motivator behind developing a new area at the American Academy of Religions in “Interreligious and Interfaith Studies.”<sup>3</sup> Our collective understanding of the imperative for and meaning of interfaith education will no doubt be informed by the unfolding conversations at this annual gathering over the next five years.<sup>4</sup>

## Dispositions that promote Interreligious learning

Beyond convening conversations, adding courses and changing curriculum, CIRCLE's work is about promoting an ethos of interreligious understanding on our campuses here in Newton, MA. This is work that includes, but necessarily goes beyond simply adding skills and knowledge measured by ATS standards. Increasingly, my colleagues and I have been talking about the qualities of character or virtues that we want to cultivate through our work.<sup>5</sup> My job as a Christian interreligious educator is to do what I can to encourage dispositions, consistent with the values of my tradition, that contribute to greater understanding across religious lines. My work also entails identifying and critique dispositions that create barriers to this work.

So let me suggest, as a work in progress, five dispositions that foster interreligious understanding. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a suggestive list to spark further conversation. These have emerged over time and they continue to be refined through the interplay of my interactions with students, conversations with colleagues, and my own convictions as a Christian.

1. **A willingness to live with paradox.** I would also describe this as having a high tolerance for ambiguity. It reflects a willingness to accept both/and without insisting on pushing out one reality for the sake of the other. This disposition is essential for being able to remain deeply rooted in one's own religious identity while being radically open to the religious identity and beliefs of another.<sup>6</sup> Paradox is at the heart of the Christian path and an important guard against absolutism - one of the primary barriers to interfaith work in my experience.<sup>7</sup>
2. **A willingness to challenge dualistic thinking.** This capacity is at the heart of dismantling harmful stereotypes that are at the root of prejudice. I owe my own awareness of the dangers of (hierarchical) dualistic thinking to the work of feminist theologians such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Reuther. The need to transcend dualistic thinking is a refrain in many religious traditions. As with work to dismantle sexism or racism, dismantling religious bigotry is fundamentally a form of consciousness-raising work. It requires us to think beyond the individual and to consider the whole system.<sup>8</sup>
3. **A willingness to be transformed.** There is a quality of curiosity and playfulness that animates the best interfaith work. It requires a flexibility and suppleness that allows for new insights and new understanding. In a Christian context I am reminded of the Benedictine vow to "conversion of life," a willingness to be remade, reborn, transformed daily as God continues to work in us. Max Stackhouse, an ethicist who taught at Andover Newton for many years, once remarked that to truly be a Christian means to be constantly open to conversion. This capacity to be changed is an important guard against a kind of unyielding resistance to transformation that is a barrier to interreligious learning.
4. **A willingness to grant the other the benefit of the doubt.** Granting others the benefit of the doubt when it comes to assessing motives and interests is an important building block for the kind of interreligious relationship building that the best interreligious learning is predicated on. It is also an important safeguard against the tendency to create fixed categories of "us" and "them," painting others with a broad brush based on one aspect of their identity.<sup>9</sup>

5. **A willingness to be humble.** In many ways, humility is the first virtue in this work. It is also essential to the Christian life. The longest chapter in *The Rule of St. Benedict*, written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century as a handbook for monks who wanted to live out the teachings of the Gospel, is on humility. I think of this as the “take the log out of your own eye first” principle.<sup>10</sup> It is an essential guard against pride, ego and arrogance. This is particularly important for Christians in the US engaged in interfaith work given our majority status.

Finally, Christian seminaries need interreligious education not only to be prepared to work in multi-religious contexts, but to live out their call as Christians. Without cultivating dispositions that inspire and enable us to get to know our neighbors across religious lines, we will inevitably fall short of a fundamental Christian obligation to: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10: 25-28).

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<sup>1</sup> Seminaries accredited by the ATS are now required to “engage students with the global character of the church as well as ministry in multi-faith and multicultural contexts.” The standard is intentionally written to leave room for interpretations consistent with the wide theological spectrum reflected among ATS member schools. As such it stops short of advocating the kind of explicit interreligious engagement that is at the heart of our work at the Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE) at Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent example of what it means to learn with rather than about the other, see Mary Boys and Sara Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue: Learning in the Presence of the Other* (Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Approved as a new group by the AAR in 2012, we had our first set of panels in 2013 at the AAR meeting in Baltimore. One of the four panels hosted under the auspices of the new group focused on Interreligious Education. I co-chair the group with Dr. Homayra Ziad. Steering Committee members include: Diana Eck, Paul Knitter, Or Rose, John Makransky and Ravi Gupta.

<sup>4</sup> Each fall issue of JIRS will be built around articles based on the presentations made at annual AAR meetings under the auspices of the interreligious and interfaith studies group.

<sup>5</sup> These conversations have been inspired in part by Catherine Cornille’s book, *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, (New York: Herder & Herder, 2008) which includes five “essential conditions” for interreligious dialogue: humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality. Here I use the term *disposition*, because I see it as suggesting attitudes that sit at the intersection of temperament (inherent, neurologically-based personality traits) and character (traits rooted in our upbringing and values that are learned and cultivated over time). If we think of one’s disposition as “the tendency to act or think in a particular way” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disposition>) crucial formation periods such as early childhood, college, transitions like parenthood – and I would argue, seminary - are powerful times when one’s default dispositions may be challenged or changed.

<sup>6</sup> My wording here intentionally echoes Andover Newton’s newly adopted mission statement: “Deeply rooted in Christian faith and radically open to what God is doing now, Andover Newton Theological School educates inspiring leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

<sup>7</sup> Two excellent articles for understanding the dangers of absolutism are Mary Gordon’s essay, “Appetite for the Absolute,” in *The Best American Spiritual Writing, 2005 edition*, Philip Zaleski ed. (Boston: Mariner Books, 2005) and an essay by Gustav Niebuhr, “Choosing Words over Bullets,” where he picks up on his great-uncle Reinhold Niebuhr’s definition of absolutism as “the self justifying quest for the impossible ideal.” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer/Autumn 2012 (Vol. 40, Nos. 3 & 4).

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<sup>8</sup> For an enlightening exploration of the dynamics and dangers of religious stereotyping see Jesper Svartvik & Jakob Wiren, eds., *Religious Stereotyping and Interreligious Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed and fascinating exploration of the dynamics of “otherizing,” see Lawrence Wills’, *Not God’s People: Insiders and Outsides in the Biblical World*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 7:3-5 “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.”

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