

# Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment<sup>1</sup>

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*Considering the emerging field of interreligious and interfaith studies, this article seeks to understand what common pedagogical themes and practices appear across interreligious courses in different institutional contexts. Based on course observation, instructor interviews, and student focus groups at eight campuses, the authors outline seven pedagogical themes and practices observed within undergraduate courses and academic programming in interfaith and interreligious studies: (1) opportunities for experiencing religious diversity, (2) case studies, (3) dialogue and deliberation, (4) interfaith and religious literacy, (5) connecting learning to professional skills, (6) fostering students' personal reflection, and (7) personal reflection or self-disclosure from the instructor. The authors seek to be descriptive for two reasons: first, to bring other instructors metaphorically into the classrooms that they observed, and second, to explore the ways in which these pedagogies suggest that interfaith and interreligious studies might be particularly concerned with the applied nature of interreligious engagement and understanding. Emerging out of a partnership between the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion and Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), the research described in this paper formed the groundwork for the Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies gathering of 25 faculty in Chicago from October 4-8, 2018. This updated version of the original research reflects insights, questions, and tensions that emerged from that gathering. The authors conclude with reflections on the disciplinary location and both the apparent and the perhaps sub rosa learning objectives of interfaith and interreligious studies as revealed by exploration of these pedagogies.*

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In the introduction to their book, *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, editors Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman ask whether the applied nature of interfaith and interreligious studies is part of what distinguishes it as a field. Speaking during a panel considering the contours and limits of the field, Peace argues that “interfaith studies is more than an academic exercise. . . . [It] is a field that values scholarship accountable to community, the dynamic link between theory and practice, and the centrality of relationships at every level.”<sup>2</sup> One way to explore the intersections between application and theory within the field is to look at how interreligious and interfaith studies courses are being taught. That is, the pedagogies and learning outcomes instructors use in the classroom may help us to answer—or at least better articulate—questions about what makes interfaith and interreligious studies a unique field.<sup>3</sup> What follows is a close look at how ten instructors at eight different institutions teach courses that, broadly speaking, contribute to interfaith and interreligious studies.

This research began as a partnership between the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion and Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC); in the fall of 2016, the

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<sup>1</sup>This essay is the subject of a series of responses found in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, no. 36 (May 2022). To view the entire issue, visit <http://irstudies.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, eds., *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), xii.

<sup>3</sup> We are aware of the various thoughtful debates around language and terms in this field, particularly around the use of “interfaith” vs. “interreligious,” and the compelling arguments for using each term. In our research, most of the instructors we spoke to use the term “interfaith,” so when we default to one term, it tends to be that one.

two organizations charged us with developing a research project to explore diverse approaches for teaching interfaith and interreligious studies.<sup>4</sup> We identified nine instructors with courses, as well as one academic student fellowship program we wanted to observe, developed a research protocol, and secured IRB approval through Wofford College.<sup>5</sup> Through course observation, instructor interviews, and interviews with student focus groups, we have seen the creative and challenging ways that faculty are teaching interfaith and interreligious topics in their classrooms, have heard from students how they experience and understand the value of learning about religious diversity, and have worked to understand the pedagogical approaches faculty are experimenting with and refining in the classroom.

In what follows, we highlight seven themes that we saw across the courses we observed. Our original purpose for this research was a gathering in Chicago in the Fall of 2018, hosted jointly by Wabash and IFYC, of all the faculty featured in the research as well as other faculty teaching interfaith and interreligious studies in religious studies and theology. The goal was to engage in a robust and constructive consideration of the emerging pedagogies of interfaith and interreligious studies. Knowing that our research would lead to this gathering framed our approach to the study. As we visited each campus, we imagined what it might be like if all the faculty we visited had joined us on our trips and observed one another's courses: what might they have seen in each other's approaches? What questions might they have had for each other? As we have written about our findings, our aim has been in part to bring these colleagues into conversation with one another through the connections and tensions discovered in their teaching. With this in mind, our work is not purely descriptive, solely providing a detailed accounting of what we saw in each course and heard from students and instructors; while that approach would no doubt be useful, we also focus on problems or questions that we saw spanning various courses that we could discover through this unique opportunity to view so many different types of courses. We are particularly interested in evidence of pedagogical practices or teaching tactics that might be unique to interfaith topics. As such, we are interested in picking up the following question: are there approaches or tactics that are characteristic of or unique to teaching on interfaith topics?

The themes we explore in the paper are:

1. Experiencing Religious Diversity
2. Case Studies Snapshots
3. Dialogue and Deliberation, In and Out of the Classroom
4. Interfaith Literacy and Religious Literacy
5. Connecting to Professional Skills
6. Students' Personal Religious Journeys
7. Personal Reflection and/or Self-Disclosure from the Instructor

If there is one theme that reaches over all the themes of the paper, it is that institutional context

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that our research is in no way meant to be representative of the myriad ways that professors are teaching interfaith topics in their classrooms. Although IFYC works with faculty in many disciplines, we focused this research on religious studies and theology faculty to align more closely with the focus of the Wabash Center. Interdisciplinarity is arguably one characteristic of interfaith studies, so future research on this topic would do well to look at how interfaith pedagogies are similar or different when they happen outside of religion classes.

<sup>5</sup> Wofford College IRB protocol: #2017-1-18-1, "An Ethnography of Interfaith Studies"; renewal #2017-1-18-3. 1

shapes everything: the type of courses instructors teach, how they teach them, their learning outcomes, and where the courses sit in the broader curriculum. Almost all the instructors we spoke with discussed how their courses were shaped, informed, and constrained by their institutional contexts. The theme was so ubiquitous that we chose to weave it throughout, rather than address it individually.

Finally, this article reflects meaningful updates that emerged when we brought our findings into conversation not just with the faculty we observed teaching, but also with the other scholars who joined us for our gathering in Chicago. Some of these updates—such as distinguishing between dialogue and deliberation, which earlier drafts did not do—are refinements and clarifications prompted by the richness of our conversations. Others, like the reflections in the conclusion, reveal unresolved concerns and tensions that emerged at the gathering and which we would be remiss not to address. We expect they will be even more salient today than they were in 2018.

### **Courses Descriptions and Study Participants**

In order to help orient the readers to the course topics and content, we offer a brief description of each of the courses we observed in our work.

#### ***Religion, Vocation, and Identity***

##### **Rose Aslan, Ph.D., California Lutheran University**

We observed Aslan’s interpretation of CLU’s Religion 100 course, which is taught by numerous instructors in the Religion Department and is required for all students. The course used to be a required course in History of Christianity, but faculty have worked to shift the course to have a more interfaith/interreligious focus in recent years and changed the name of the course to reflect this. The class opens with an introduction to Diana Eck’s understanding of pluralism, and this remains an orienting theory throughout; Aslan also emphasizes the importance of countering misinformation and stereotypes with many activities that help students to assess and seek out correct information about religion. For the session we observed, students were engaging in a role-playing game that Aslan has developed to reflect real interreligious conflict; this particular class was playing out a conflict around the right of women to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The course had about thirty first-year students.

#### ***Islam in America***

##### **Rose Aslan, Ph.D., California Lutheran University**

One of the overarching themes of this upper-level course was an emphasis on the diversity of Islam; Aslan engaged students in topics like Islam and sports or the LGBTQ+ Muslim community. Many of the enrolled students to whom we spoke were studying Communications and were interested in the connections Aslan made to misinformation about Islam and skills for seeking correct information about the tradition. For the session we observed, students were engaging in a different version of Aslan’s role-playing game, all taking on characters and positions around the Park 51 Muslim Community Center controversy. The course had fourteen

upper-level students.

### ***Interfaith Atlanta Across the Color Line***

**Matthew Cressler, Ph.D., College of Charleston**

With this two-and-a-half-week intensive study-away course, Cressler aimed to create an immersion experience that would explore the connections and tensions between interfaith and racial justice approaches to diversity and social change. Students spent the first week in the classroom in Charleston learning about the study of religion (and theories of lived religion in particular) and theories of social change that would frame their experience in Atlanta. The following week, students experienced and participated in work with several racial justice and service-learning organizations and visited numerous religious communities with a local interfaith organization that leads interfaith tours of Atlanta. Throughout the course, Cressler asked students to analyze and assess their experiences in light of the theories with which they began the class: what did they observe or experience that might give evidence for the effectiveness of interfaith action or racial justice work to create social change? The class leveraged institutional opportunities and funding as well as Cressler's personal and professional ties in Atlanta. The course was intimate: by the time we met them, the five students had built intense relationships with one another and were able to talk candidly and with ease about race, religion, and deep disagreements.

### ***Spiritual Storytelling***

**Rev. Suzanne Watts Henderson, Ph.D., Queens University**

Henderson developed this spiritual autobiography course as a general education course that would introduce interfaith themes to students who are unlikely to engage with religion in their curriculum. The course is organized around memoirs and first-person narratives from a variety of religious and ethical traditions; rather than lecturing about the traditions using a more traditional world religions approach, Henderson uses the narratives to introduce topics of religious literacy that the students can then explore together in class. Students are also required to write their own spiritual autobiography as a part of the class. Over the past few years, Henderson has been actively working to help Queens students see the relevance of the study of religion; she recently worked to change the name of the major from "Religious Studies" to "Interfaith Studies," which resulted in a four-fold increase in the number of majors in one year. As a part of our visit to Queens, we did a focus group with current students, as well as students who had participated in a similar course the previous semester; this offered a unique opportunity to hear how students felt that ideas had continued to impact them beyond their time in class. The class we observed had 10 students of varying years in college.

### ***Caregiving at the End of Life***

**Wakoh Hickey, Ph.D., and Hannah Murphy Buc, MSN, RN, Notre Dame of Maryland University**

This course was the only interdisciplinary course we observed, bringing together professors in

religious studies (Hickey) and nursing (Murphy Buc) to teach a course bridging the practical skills of end-of-life care with an emphasis on holistic care for religiously diverse patients. The course included modules on religious literacy, hands-on training, and experiential components such as meditation in and out of class and interfaith dialogues on death. Perhaps in part because the course was in the honors college, the students were very committed and hardworking, and many of the students in disciplines related to the health professions found the reading and writing assignments challenging but rewarding. At the undergraduate level, NDMU is an all-women’s college, and we wondered if this contributed to a dynamic of vulnerability and openness that we observed throughout. The class had about fifteen students in it, all female.

### ***Introduction to Interfaith Studies***

#### **Nancy Klancher, Ph.D., Bridgewater College**

Klancher’s introduction to interfaith studies centers on the practice of “public deliberation,” a group dialogue method Nancy developed for approaching cases of religious diversity or conflict in the classroom. Her approach focuses on cultivating students’ awareness of the roles they can play in these kinds of situations and on emphasizing their agency, both in the classroom conversations and in analogous situations beyond the classroom. Additionally, the course explores theories of interfaith engagement, basic religious literacy, and includes experiences of interfaith dialogue through partnership with a nearby university. The class had about 20 students; the majority were sophomores and juniors. Many of the students taking the course reported doing so because it filled a general education requirement and they found the approach challenging but rewarding.

### ***World Religions***

#### **Kevin Minister, Ph.D., Shenandoah University**

Minister tell his students that his World Religions class has a tagline: “Navigating religious diversity,” suggesting the ways in which this is not a typical world religions course. Focusing on case studies and creative assignments that challenge students to think through the implications of religious diversity, Minister “works backwards” to religious literacy, having students engage with traditions through case studies before digging into the history and beliefs of the traditions. The emphasis is on what needs to be known about traditions in order to engage with them in the workplace or civic spaces. This reflects a changing emphasis of the Religious Studies Program at Shenandoah, which the department has worked to revitalize by making deliberate connections to the university’s pre-professional emphasis. The course we observed had about twenty students of varying years in school.

### ***Beyond Conflict and Tolerance: Interreligious Encounters and Social Change***

#### **Brian Pennington, Ph.D., Elon University**

This course is the capstone for the Interreligious Studies minor and was being taught for the first time when we visited in Spring 2018. The learning goals for the course revolve around providing an overview and history of Interfaith and Interreligious Studies, understanding what those terms

might mean in different contexts, and giving students a glimpse into critiques of liberal discourses on tolerance and pluralism. The day we observed was late in the semester, and the collaborative, “pulling everything together” ethos in class was palpable. Specifically, the class session involved an analysis of an online debate between Lucia Hulsether and Eboo Patel on interfaith structures, efforts, and philosophies. The students were able to link many different types of analytical skills—of media narratives, of arguments for and methods of interfaith cooperation, of critiques of the interfaith movement in America, of charts of data about global demographics—in nuanced ways that wove together practice, engagement, interfaith philosophies, and historical context. Seventeen students were present in the class on the day of our observation.

### ***Islam in America***

#### **Rev. Deanna Ferree Womack, Ph.D., Candler School of Theology**

Womack’s course considering the history and diversity of Islam in America was both explicitly and implicitly interfaith, thanks to the institutional context and her pedagogical strategies. Unique among the courses we observed, students in this class were graduate students, primarily in the Master of Divinity program at Candler, though a few were Ph.D. students or in other master’s programs. As far as we could tell, all students self-identified as Christian. While some students had come to the program immediately after college, many were pursuing the program after spending varying amounts of time in other careers. This meant that questions of the applicability of the course were evident, as many students were anticipating future leadership in congregational or civic settings. Additionally, students demonstrated a degree of self-awareness and maturity not developmentally typical of many undergraduates. Womack worked continually to make interfaith connections for the students, creating opportunities for interfaith dialogues “with” the text as well as classroom guests from diverse perspectives within Islam. Students were also required to do several projects that would translate their learnings into congregational resources and programs that could be concretely used in their careers beyond the class. The class had twenty-four students in it.

### ***Multifaith Fellows Program***

#### **Amy Allocco, Ph.D., Elon University**

We did not observe a course taught by Allocco but were able to observe her teaching and mentorship skills (by virtue of lucky timing) during a lunchtime meeting she and Pennington were facilitating among students and faculty doing research in South Asian studies. Allocco is the director (and creator) of Elon’s Multifaith Scholars Program, which she described as having three prongs: academic coursework, faculty-mentored undergraduate research, and community engagements. The students involved with this program often link international study with their research, and when on campus, are involved with community engagement during the academic year. One thing that is particularly distinctive about this program is the nature of Allocco’s attention to students’ psycho-social development as well as their intellectual growth over the course of their time in the program. The nature of the program—particularly the fact that it affords her a two-year period of time to work closely with a relatively small number of students—gives the students the benefits of structure, mentoring, and support from a cohort group of peers.

## **Theme 1: Experiencing Religious Diversity in the Classroom**

In the courses we observed, instructors used several methods to help students directly engage with or experience religious diversity first-hand. For the majority of the courses we observed, the student composition was relatively homogenous, with most students identifying as Christian, raised Christian but no longer identifying as such, or as “nones” (or rather, of no particular religious affiliation).<sup>6</sup> Given this demographic make-up, creating encounters with religious diversity often required engagement with people and places beyond the students. Site visits to diverse religious communities, guest lectures or visits from leaders or members of different religious communities, and opportunities to participate in religious practices that may be unfamiliar to students are all tactics that will be familiar to many religious studies instructors. Thus, we were interested in the particular questions raised by these practices for courses with explicitly interfaith/interreligious learning goals. In our observations of courses and discussions with students, we heard several student responses to religious diversity that we think have particular salience for teaching interfaith or interreligious courses.

First, in a number of courses, students articulated the purpose or value of site visits primarily in terms of an opportunity for their own self-discovery. In response to this, instructors recognized the need to create processes for reflection that could be put in conversation with the theories and methods for studying religion that their courses also introduced. We saw this in the ways students in Cressler’s interfaith immersion class worked to process their experiences traveling around Atlanta to diverse site visits as a part of an interfaith immersion program; in the ways Hickey and Murphy Buc’s students described how the diverse meditative and reflective practices that they did both in and out of class contributed to their own spiritual journeys; and in the ways Allocco described her underlying pedagogical philosophy for structuring student interfaith engagement opportunities with local community partners and with students studying internationally.

Our interview with Cressler, for example, reflected that he found it important to create space for students to name their emotional reactions to the site visits, which were often visceral and immediate, but then to help them move into a more critical and self-aware reflection, asking them questions about what it meant to be participating in an interfaith program that intentionally created these kinds of experiences for its participants and to use the theories of interfaith engagement and social change they had discussed in class to do that self-analysis. As such, the students themselves almost became the subjects of academic study.<sup>7</sup> This approach might be seen as standing in contrast to Hickey and Murphy Buc’s, where the emphasis on these practices – in the context of a course on care for those in diverse traditions at the end of life—was on self-care for the healthcare practitioner and tools for care for the patient.

In our interview with her, Allocco explained that, usually, two students in the Multifaith Scholars cohort study abroad each semester. In order to allow those students a space to reflect and process their experiences with the other Multifaith Scholars still at Elon, Allocco created a closed Facebook group where the students are required to post pictures, reflections and

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<sup>6</sup> “Nones on the Rise,” Pew Research Center, accessed July 23, 2021 <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Cressler, interview with Meyer, May 25, 2017.

comments. Because the forum is not public, it provides a space where students' writing can be raw and conversational. The rapport of the cohort allows the students to be vulnerable with one another and to process things together, guided by Allocco; she is mindful of attending not only to the cognitive aspects of their scholarship, but to the psycho-social developmental aspects of their experiences as well.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, because interfaith/interreligious studies arguably aims toward not just teaching about diverse traditions, but also developing in students the capacity for engaging with those of diverse backgrounds, we wondered how varying experiences of site visits might contribute to these learning outcomes. In Cressler's class, students visited two very different Hindu communities, and in the discussion following the visits we found students centering on language of "authenticity" to evaluate their experiences of the tradition. At the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, students heard a white convert to Hinduism discuss the ways that Hinduism resonated with Christianity's core themes and spoke to universal values of peace; they then quietly observed as he took the class through a worship ritual. Later, students visited the Chinmaya Mission in Atlanta, where the host, an immigrant from India, seemed less interested in presenting his community and tradition in a way that would resonate with a group of social-justice-minded Millennials; he lectured students, talked over their questions, and dwelled on the problems of "society these days." In their debrief after the visits, students repeatedly discussed the Vedanta leader as "authentic," particularly in comparison to the Chinmaya leader. Cressler worked to help students think about how their own personal religious experiences or expectations of what a religion "ought" to be were coloring their perspectives; when he pointed out how often the word "authentic" had come up for the white American convert, but not the Indian Hindu who was born into the tradition, the group got very quiet. This kind of critical self-reflection is arguably natural for a religious studies course with experiential components. Given that interfaith relations beyond the classroom will require relationship with both the "authentic" Hindu leader and "the old Grandpa," as one of the students derisively named the less-popular Hindu leader, we wonder what opportunities site and classroom visits might raise for addressing and engaging the complexity of interfaith and interreligious relationship building.<sup>9</sup> Put differently, are the stakes for this kind of experiential learning different in an interfaith/interreligious course than they might be in a religious studies course, where outcomes might include both learning about diverse traditions *and* learning how to interact with the complex people and communities who make up those traditions?

Our observations of students' experiences of diverse religions also raised questions about how critique of traditions might fit into interfaith engagement. When Womack asked students to read first-person accounts from women within the Nation of Islam, several students in the class struggled with what they saw as the inherent patriarchy in the tradition, and the way the narratives seemed to elide their perceived realities of oppression.<sup>10</sup> A number of these students—who themselves were studying to be Christian ministers or leaders—had left more patriarchal communities of their own faith, so had their own self-identified spiritual baggage in mind, or felt the need to "protect" the women they feared were being harmed by their traditions. We can

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<sup>8</sup> Amy Allocco, interview with Jones, April 16, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> "Interfaith Atlanta Across the Color Line," course observation by Meyer, May 24, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> The text Womack used was Dawn-Marie Gibson and Jamillah Karim, *Women of the Nation: Between Black Protest and Sunni Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).



imagine in a world religions course there might be more room for critique or analysis of, for example, the gender dynamics at play in a given tradition. These students, however, were also thinking about the real interfaith relationships in which they might someday engage, and their dual roles as ministers concerned for those harmed by religious traditions as well as leaders seeking to build relationships across lines of religious difference. Indeed, they had the very real opportunity to engage in such relationship-building when a leader from the Atlanta Nation of Islam, as well as one of the women featured in the book they had read, came to visit their class.

With each of these student responses noted above, instructors worked to guide students to think critically about their own responses. This back-and-forth between, on the one hand, how students experience these encounters, and on the other hand, how instructors hope to shape them in light of course goals, raises questions about the nature of interfaith/interreligious teaching and learning.

- If leadership or civic engagement are goals of interfaith/interreligious studies, is student spiritual or ethical development a necessary part of the learning outcomes for these fields? If so, how does this fit into significant critiques of the field that are concerned that interfaith/interreligious teaching falls into pitfalls of spiritual tourism or colonialism or that it betrays the seriousness and rigor of the academic study of religion?
- If the skills of relationship-building should be included in the learning outcomes of interfaith/interreligious studies, can students' experiences of religious diversity—particularly encounters that do not go “perfectly”—be understood as tools for learning about the realities and messiness of interfaith relationships?
- Many faculty members we spoke with agreed that self-awareness and self-critique of one's own commitments and worldview were appropriate learning outcomes for interfaith-focused courses. But does that mean students' own spiritual interests should be sidelined? If students are drawn to not just reflection, but experiences or practices that they find spiritually enriching or developing, is that problematic in an academic classroom, and if so, why?
- Should these experiences be understood primarily as steppingstones for deeper, critical academic work? Or are they somehow connected to learning outcomes focused not just on the academic study of religion, but also on impacting the way those from different religious backgrounds interact in the world?
- Many instructors we spoke with mentioned the challenge of setting up “successful” site- or classroom-visits, and voiced concern about working to orchestrate “palatable”, but likely one-dimensional, representations of a tradition. At the same time, many knew this might be the first opportunity for many of their students to encounter someone of a different faith, and felt a burden to therefore do justice to the traditions and ensure that the experience didn't reinforce negative stereotypes or bigotry.

## Theme 2: Case Studies Snapshots

If interfaith and interreligious studies has something like a “signature” pedagogy, the case study method is arguably it.<sup>11</sup> Many of the instructors we spoke with used some sort of case study activity to help their students explore the challenges of religious diversity and find avenues for constructive interfaith action. Further, at IFYC we know both through anecdotal conversations with faculty teaching and through data we have on use of the case study resources we have developed that this is one of the most common tools employed by faculty for teaching interfaith topics.

In her description of the case study methodology in interfaith/interreligious studies, Ellie Pierce of Harvard’s Pluralism Project and one of the pioneers in developing interreligious and multifait case studies for the teaching of religion, writes, “Decision-based case studies ask us ... ‘What are you going to do about this?’ and challenge those engaged in the field of interfaith studies to prioritize skills and action over theories.”<sup>12</sup> In several of the classes we saw, both instructors and students named the efficacy of this skills-based emphasis. Nancy Klancher, who used several cases throughout the semester in her interfaith studies class, described how effective she found it to repeatedly ask students, “‘What are *you* going to do?’ Many of them have never been asked that question...this was the first time that they could imagine themselves with agency and were invested with making a difference in the world.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Minister’s students recounted that although the case studies often felt like they raised complex and even intractable questions, the work that they were doing to think through religious diversity was preparing them with skills relevant for their diverse careers, from art to pharmacy and criminal justice.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to Pierce’s articulation above, however, we did not see this emphasis on the skills or action as the sole end goal of the discussion; indeed, we saw a deep intentionality in instructors to attend to the theoretical and philosophical nature of the work. Both Minister and Klancher used frameworks to help students analyze cases that had resonance with the Pluralism Project’s framework of Assessment/Diagnosis/Action but which also asked questions about the ethical import of their work.<sup>15</sup> In Minister’s course, he asked students to articulate the “ethical reasoning” that caused them to advocate for one line of action, identifying rules or virtues that could be applied to other interreligious dilemmas. Klancher emphasized in her conversations with us how much metacognition was central to her approach with students; throughout the case study we observed in her classroom, she pushed students to reflect on, and articulate, how their own values, assumptions, and commitments were motivating their decision making and advocacy for certain approaches or action. In other words, even as she worked to develop their skills around interfaith action, she also worked with them to identify motivating values and principles.

We saw one other approach to case studies in the classroom that stuck out to us as unique. For both her introductory religion course and her “Islam in America” course, Aslan uses what she describes as a role-playing game to help students imagine themselves in the midst of a story of interreligious conflict. Based on the approach of *Reacting to the Past*, Aslan uses a current

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<sup>11</sup> Ellie Pierce, “Using the Case Studies Method in Interfaith Studies Classrooms,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Klancher, interview with the authors, December 1, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Student focus group for Kevin Minister’s *World Religions Course*, focus group with the authors, March 29, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Pierce, 73-74.

or recent event of tension or conflict and assigns students detailed roles that they must then research and enact in class.<sup>16</sup> While many instructors assign roles in case studies, what we saw Aslan doing was much more elaborate and required more leadership on behalf of students (and more trust from the instructor that the students would take that leadership).

In the “Islam in America” Class, Aslan assigned students to consider the conflict around the Park 51 Muslim Community Center in downtown Manhattan, which was meant to be a community center open to those of all backgrounds as well as a Muslim place of worship, but due to its proximity to the World Trade Center became a flashpoint of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim backlash. Describing the goal of the activity to be a chance “to reconcile multiple perspectives and to come up with a solution,” Aslan gives the students a basic overview of the issue, but then requires them to do research in more detail; she assigns individual students a specific role that they must be ready to step into and represent during the role-playing class session. Aslan also gives students a list of recommended resources and websites that they can use to research the roles they are taking on.<sup>17</sup>

In class, and in contrast to the other approaches we observed, Aslan took a fairly hands-off approach, allowing students to guide the direction of the interactions and activities, with a short debrief at the end. Though we were not there to observe follow-up conversations about the activity in class, we wondered about learning outcomes for the different approaches we saw from Aslan, Minister, and Klancher. We could imagine students from Aslan’s class describing the activity in very embodied terms (and indeed, some of this came out in our focus groups), whereas students in our focus groups from Klancher and Minister’s courses described frameworks and skills gleaned from the case studies that they would use for approaching religious diversity in different settings.

In considering case studies with regard to interfaith/interreligious pedagogy, several issues emerged for us for further discussion:

- What we saw Minister and Klancher doing with case studies was not “just” about skills and action, but also about the kinds of analysis, critical thinking, and development of a civic orientation that are arguably central to the project of liberal education.
- As higher education broadly wrestles with questions of how applicability to professions and marketability play into understanding of the value of higher education, we are interested in further conversations about how a case study methodology can be seen both as fostering practical skills and contributing to critical thinking, analysis, and articulation of civic values.

### **Theme 3: Dialogue In and Out of the Classroom**

We saw many creative approaches to interfaith and interreligious dialogue for students both in and out of the classroom that will likely be familiar to instructors trying to create experiences of

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<sup>16</sup> For information on *Reacting to the Past*, see <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>

<sup>17</sup> The full activity includes a list of nearly thirty different roles, and can be viewed here: [https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/RolePlayingActivity\\_Resource\\_10-21-16.pdf](https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/RolePlayingActivity_Resource_10-21-16.pdf)

interfaith learning. Instructors gave time to in-class interfaith dialogue, asked students to participate in interfaith programming outside of class, and created opportunities for dialogue at site visits.

We also saw a number of examples where instructors seemed to be working to go beyond what might be described as an “introductory” dialogue between individuals of different religious and ethical identities, working to go deeper than the kind of conversation that might happen in a first-time encounter or campus interfaith dialogue program. In the instances we highlight below, we saw instructors moving toward the cultivation of character and skills conducive to dialogue in their students, and working to help them self-identify as people capable of contributing to and leading conversations with those who are different from them. This work went beyond offering guidelines for not offending those from a different background, or the basic literacy often provided leading up to a site visit, to prompting students to think about their own leadership and agency.

Before proceeding, it might be helpful to say a bit more about what we mean by *dialogue*. Arguably many kinds of conversation that happen in the college classroom could be understood as dialogue; without offering a formal definition of the term, for this particular section, we are highlighting pedagogical approaches that sought to foster classroom-based conversations or experiences that:

- Included multiple religious or ethical voices
- Emphasized both the values of consensus-building or finding common understanding *and* recognizing real differences and disagreements
- Created space for and valued empathy with diverse perspectives
- Pushed students to self-reflect on their own dispositions for dialogue
- Asked students to think about their own skills for leading dialogue and reflect on application of those skills beyond the classroom

Several of the instructors we observed emphasized—in their teaching and our discussions with them—the intentional work they did to model interfaith/interreligious dialogue and give students opportunities to practice dialogue in the classroom. We saw these instructors treating the classroom almost as a laboratory for skill development. They did this through modeling dialogue practices themselves as well as working to make students self-aware of their own propensities, strengths, and insecurities about interfaith/interreligious dialogue. While many faculty may feel like interfaith/interreligious dialogue in the classroom is challenging due to classroom homogeneity or expectations regarding the types of conversation appropriate for the classroom, we saw examples of faculty playing with these boundaries.

Klancher has developed her own methodology for interfaith and interreligious classroom engagement that she calls “public deliberation,” an approach to dialogue that emphasizes collaborative problem-solving and skill-building; as such, it sits somewhere between the case study methodology and more formal methods of interfaith dialogue, but we reflect on it here because of the particular emphasis Klancher puts on what might be seen as dialogic structures and the value of fostering empathy in participants. Klancher introduces the idea of public deliberations at the beginning of class as a kind of discourse that requires the skills of active

listening, perspective-taking, and relationship building, as well as an opportunity to reflect on one’s own role in these conversations and in the world.<sup>18</sup> Over the course of the semester, students engage in several public deliberations, each one meant to build on the last as an opportunity to cultivate skills over time, and give students the chance to reflect collectively and individually on the practice and cultivation. As mentioned above, Klancher emphasizes students’ “metacognition,” or what we understood as an ability to analyze the dynamics in a conversation; reflection on and self-awareness of one’s own role, limitations, and perspectives; empathetic listening skills; and the cultivation of skills that contribute to leadership in civic spaces. To help students cultivate metacognition, Klancher identifies six positively-framed roles dialogue participants are likely to fill during the course of a public deliberation (e.g., The “Active Listener” listens carefully for content, emotion, and assumptions; the “Generous Thinker” responds to peers; shares experiences different from others; the “Glue” makes connections between contributions, stays deliberative, and so forth).<sup>19</sup> Klancher pushes students to see themselves as flexible and adaptable, able to take on different roles and contribute to conversations in varying ways as the conversation requires.

In her “Islam in America” class, Womack also works to create deliberate space for students to be self-reflective about the varied roles they play in dialogue. Womack introduced three layers of dialogue in the course we observed: (1) dialogue with a text as a sort of “stand-in” for someone of another faith; (2) *intra*faith dialogue, where Christian students could discuss among themselves the challenges of interfaith dialogue and also reflect on the dispositions necessary for interfaith leadership as Christians; and (3) interfaith dialogue with a visitor from a different tradition which could serve as practice for future interfaith dialogues with people from different backgrounds.

In terms of dialogue with the text, Womack began the discussion by asking students to reflect on what they needed in order to read the text as a dialogue across difference. She asked students to recognize how they personally felt and were impacted “as they were in dialogue with the text,” to navigate between their emotional response to the text, their ability to analyze their text as scholars, and their desire to empathize with those featured in the text as future pastors. Several times she would pause and say, “I see you moving back and forth between your own emotions and [academic] response to this text.”<sup>20</sup>

In observing Womack’s class, we were struck by the ways that she both explicitly and implicitly modeled dialogue throughout—in how she used excellent dialogue facilitation techniques to foster conversation among her students, how she gave students opportunities to practice these themselves, and in how she challenged them to think about how these skills would be used in their future congregational or religious leadership.

The last example we will highlight is the work that Hickey and Buc did in their interdisciplinary class on end-of-life care and religious diversity. Building on a pedagogical practice developed by Sid Brown at Sewanee: The University of the South, called “Careful

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<sup>18</sup> Nancy Klancher, “Public Deliberations in Interfaith Pedagogies: Interfaith Leaders in the Public Sphere.” *The Journal of Interreligious Studies*, 20 (March 2017): 9–28, accessed July 20, 2018. <https://irstudies.org/index.php/jirs/article/view/243/239>

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Klancher, “Deliberative Roles,” unpublished course artifact.

<sup>20</sup> Deanna Womack, course observation by the authors, August 30, 2017.

Conversations,” Hickey and Buc’s dialogue practice was student-led and occurred outside of the classroom, but was successful, we suspect, due to the work both instructors did in class to prepare students for the potentially challenging activity and conversation.<sup>21</sup> For the activity, students had to meet one-on-one with a student of a different religious or ethical background and have a conversation around understandings of death in each perspective. Using a list of set questions, the interviewee first responds to each question while the interviewer listens; roles are then reversed and the listener becomes the speaker, the speaker the listener. Drawing on Brown’s activity, the conversation is carefully scripted, and requires students to do reflective pre-work before and after the conversation.

Additionally, the instructors designed several practices throughout the semester focused on empathy and self-care that seemed to contribute to students’ ability to participate well in the Careful Conversations. At the beginning of each class, Hickey, who is an ordained Buddhist priest, has served as a Buddhist chaplain, and has significant training in contemplative practices, led the group in a short, guided meditation (designed to be inclusive of students from all backgrounds), and students were required to pick one meditative practice to engage with as homework every night during the semester. Since most of the students in this class were not from religious studies backgrounds—primarily from nursing, pharmacy, or other health or science programs—the emphasis on the skills of interfaith dialogue felt immediately translatable. One student described how nurses often just ask about a patient’s religion to check a box on a form; “now I know how to integrate conversation about values into my care; some people want to talk about it and some don’t, but I know how to open that space, now.”<sup>22</sup> As many of them were already working in settings with patients, the value of these conversations was obvious and immediate.

As we reflect on the robustly developed skills of facilitating, modeling, and creating dialogue opportunities for students in the classroom which each of these instructors embodied, as well as their emphasis on cultivating those skills in their students, we are struck by the fact that all three of these religious studies and theology scholars also have training in these skills beyond their training as academics. Klancher has worked as a higher education administrator and in student affairs; Hickey has training in leading and creating meditation and contemplative practice experiences and substantial training and experiences in religious leadership and chaplaincy; Womack is an ordained Presbyterian minister who has long been involved in interfaith programs at the community and congregational level.

An issue for further discussion is this: in working with faculty, IFYC staff often hear from faculty who would like to do more robust interfaith dialogue in their classrooms, but who feel ill-prepared to do so, and are concerned about the many ways the dialogue might go very badly. As we reflect on the training and experiences that we suspect contributed to the effectiveness of the instructors highlighted above in teaching dialogue, we wonder what it might look like for more faculty to get training or education to support this work in their classrooms.

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<sup>21</sup> Adapted from Sid Brown, *A Buddhist in the Classroom* (Binghamton, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 121–25.

<sup>22</sup> Student Focus Group for Wakoh Hickey and Hannah Murphy Buc’s *Caregiving at the End of Life* course, focus group with the authors, March 2, 2017.

## Theme 4: Interfaith Literacy and Religious Literacy

One challenge that presents itself again and again when professors are planning courses in interfaith or interreligious studies revolves around religious literacy, or what some call “interfaith literacy.” It seems that, at least among the courses we observed, one thing is constant: the “facts” about religious traditions are considered important—even vital—but not as ends in themselves. Rather, professors often conceptualize (when creating syllabi) and frame (when teaching students) the elements of religious literacy as basics that one needs to know in order to grasp a particular example of engagement that will be examined in the course.

A common practice among many of the professors we observed could best be described using the image of a sort of “content sieve.” In other words, professors often use something like a case study (or news article, or memoir about religious experience) as a tool to sift through the information that students will need to learn in order to understand the dynamics of the case study itself. Some professors (such as Klancher) create their own documents outlining the basics of a tradition, explaining to students that the information contained therein will provide context for the case study.<sup>23</sup> Others ask the students themselves to work through what they might need to know in order to make sense of the case study at hand; this working-through of what one should try to figure out, of determining the pathway toward understanding the case study, is part of the classwork itself.

This practice of getting students to determine the kinds of knowledge they might need was evident in several courses. Minister asks students to “work backward” toward religious literacy, engaging traditions through case studies before digging into the history, beliefs, and practices of the traditions themselves. Minister’s pedagogical tactic also involves metacognition: students’ consciously describing the *type* of information they might need (for example, is this part of the tradition’s ethical framework? do we need to know something about the history and context of the town in which this case study happened?), as well as thinking about where they could learn about the *content* of the necessary information.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Aslan’s role-playing exercises engage a “work backward approach”: once receiving their role assignments for the game, students have to ask themselves, “What element of my [character’s] social location, religious commitments, etc., might impact the way I would respond to this situation?”<sup>25</sup>

In addition to using case studies and role-playing exercises as tools to sift through and narrow down what should be covered (and what could be left out without negatively impacting the learning objectives for the exercise), professors also employ other types of content sieves. Henderson’s use of narratives and memoirs is one example of this: students approach traditions they may be unfamiliar with through first-person narratives, and she asks them to bring questions of comprehension or missing information that they encounter to class discussions. Many instructors we observed introduce class periods or new sections of their courses with a resource from popular culture (something that wasn’t necessarily created with an academic audience in mind) or with some sort of text that focuses on lived experience (a video, an ethnography, a travel log). Using these types of resources both engages students’ attention and allows them to begin

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy Klancher, interview with the authors, December 1, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Minister, interview with the authors, March 29, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Rose Aslan, interview with Meyer, January 9, 2018

forming (and narrowing down) their own questions about a tradition. In this framework, once students have responded to the initial resource, they can then turn to more “facts-based” material that revolves around answering specific questions that have come up via their initial responses.

In each of our student focus group interviews, we asked if there had been one assignment, reading, or exercise from the course that had been particularly impactful. Several times, students mentioned the resources from popular culture as being the things they remembered most vividly. The students suggested that what made these assignments stand out was the fact that their connection to the content of the course was not immediately apparent to them—or, perhaps, it was the fact that it simply wouldn’t have occurred to them to look on YouTube, to current films, or to relatively-recent episodes of *60 Minutes* for course material. Seeing something that they had not previously slotted into their unconscious definitions of what counted as “academic” made an impression and helped them see new connections between what they were learning in class and (what students often call) “the real world.”

One final example of a content sieve (or heuristic) involved courses that intentionally focused on only one tradition (such as Islam) within one particular context that itself provided variety and multiplicity of focus (different iterations of Islam throughout American history, or responses to Islam in contemporary media). Both professors we observed who taught courses that focused on Islam (Aslan and Womack) talked about how—at least in the current context of American life—teaching about Islam requires an interfaith or interreligious approach, almost by default. For Womack, the interfaith or interreligious nature of her Islam-focused course springs from her context: she is teaching her course in an explicit context of Christian ministry (or preparation for other types of Christian leadership). Aslan addressed the fact that, because Islam is consistently “othered” in current American culture, any teaching about it is necessarily, at least in part, about Muslims’ navigation of that perceived otherness.

In the next section, where we discuss the ways in which some professors point out explicit connections between interfaith studies and what might be broadly called “life skills” (both in and out of the workplace), there is a clear connection to the element of interfaith literacy that involves helping students cultivate the ability (and courage) to speak skillfully about interreligious encounters. Reflections on teaching tactics for productively fostering religious literacy in an interfaith or interreligious studies classroom cannot help but bring up several questions:

- What, exactly, do we mean by “literacy”? Certainly religious literacy involves a knowledge of, among other things, basic practices, beliefs, and history. But the term *literacy* also involves notions of facility in the use of a language—clarity of expression and appropriateness of style for particular audiences.
- How much time should be spent teaching “facts” about the religious traditions—history, context, basic practices and beliefs—and how much time should be spent on material more directly related to how the traditions interact with one another?
- One heuristic that seems to be helpful for many instructors planning courses in interfaith studies juxtaposes an interfaith studies course with a sort of “religions of the world”



course. How is this distinction useful when thinking about cultivating interfaith or interreligious literacy, in particular, within the scope of a course with broader learning goals?

- In order to learn, in a rigorous and responsible way, about how people from within one religious community interact with people from within another religious community, how much does one first have to know about the two religious communities themselves? How much do students need to know about the parts that make up the whole before they can think about the whole in a new way?
- If one is trying to present the “basics” of a religious tradition, a sort of “101” version prior to looking at a case study, how can the basics be presented in a way that avoids students’ making broad (false) generalizations (that “all Muslims think *this* way,” etc.)?

### **Theme 5: Connecting to Professional Skills**

The fact that the field of interfaith/interreligious studies is burgeoning in higher education at the same time that the very value of higher education is being re-examined, questioned, and sometimes weaponized by politicians creates a complex dynamic. As colleges and universities have faced financial strains, watched student demographics shift, worked to remain safe and financially viable during the COVID-19 pandemic, and confronted changing student and parental demands in the face of a shifting job market, many have been forced to re-examine what, exactly, it is they are offering to students, and how those offerings accord with a contemporary understanding of institutional mission. It is clear that many parents and prospective students struggle to understand how traditional liberal arts courses—especially those in the humanities—matter within the context of higher education and preparation for life after college. Thus, many schools have tried to clarify their narratives in order to explain in clear, jargon-free ways how and why the courses they offer matter, especially in light of students’ work prospects after they graduate.

For example, at the time of our campus visit, Shenandoah University had leaned into the tie between professional skills development and course content, embracing this connection as part of its branding. On its home web page, the heading “Career Readiness” sat atop the following statement: “We work with students in all aspects of the career development process, from choosing a major to career changes. Career development is a lifelong process influenced by all aspects of life, with the end result being high quality of life and personal satisfaction.”<sup>26</sup> Shenandoah combines one of the more traditional valences of a liberal arts education—that the value of such an education lies in facilitating the living of a good life—with an overarching focus on practical, post-college concerns. The statement promises to help students cultivate skills that will guide them in both finding work after graduation and navigating the likelihood of a career change at some point in their working lives. Minister had framed his interfaith coursework firmly within the context of Shenandoah’s overarching goals and mission, emphasizing the “real world” applicability and importance of learning about religion. He made explicit, in ways that his students found persuasive, the relevance of interreligious studies to living a fulfilling, productive life. Minister’s framing of his course had also occurred within the context of a shift in

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.su.edu/>, accessed August 9, 2108.

Shenandoah's religion department—one that resembled shifts in undergraduate religion departments all over the country in the last 20+ years. Whereas the religion department used to be oriented toward a sort of “Christian studies” approach (with courses about “other” religions taught by adjunct faculty), now the department focuses on how religion shapes society and how different religions interact with each other in various contexts. This departmental focus on how religion shapes society in an interconnected world was readily apparent in the course we observed (“World Religions”). In it, Minister focuses on what he calls “operative knowledge” rather than “content,” explaining that a primary goal of the course is helping students understand how people make sense of religious difference. In addition to focusing on examples of how other people have made sense of religious difference in the past, Minister also emphasizes students’ being able to do so, for themselves, in the present and future—their being “able to talk about interreligious difference. What’s important to me is that we figure out a way to work through this and do it *in conversation with one another*.”<sup>27</sup> This learning goal, in turn, has led to another change that he has made in the course over the years: in light of his desire for students to be able to talk productively about religious difference, he now spends time, at the beginning of the course, on enhancing students’ interpersonal skills—on trying to help them work through their hesitancy to talk to one another about things of substance.

Like Hickey and Buc in their course on caregiving at the end of life, Minister draws on Sid Brown’s “Careful Conversations” exercise, which not only helps students learn to talk about what has shaped them in terms of their own worldview, but also to “learn about themselves as they learn to express to one another” their impressions of the things that have shaped them.<sup>28</sup> Students appreciated the fact that the course both taught them about how religion might become a topic of importance in workplace contexts and gave them practice on learning to talk about it.

One thing that was striking in all the classes we observed was how many of the professors focused on improved communication skills, empathy, and media literacy as (meta) learning goals in their interfaith studies courses. They emphasized how improved interpersonal communications skills were linked to professional skills—as well as general life skills—that would serve them well, no matter what type of work they ended up doing after graduation.

Many professors also made an effort to help students in different academic majors see the explicit ties between their major coursework and the applicability of interfaith and interreligious learning. Students planning to go into the healthcare professions found the applicability of skills and dispositions cultivated through interfaith/interreligious studies particularly meaningful. In several conversations, students referred to the importance of learning to listen to someone with a different worldview, or being able to have an engaged conversation, without that conversation’s becoming a debate, as vital to caregiving. This connection naturally emerged in Hickey and Buc’s course. Through the “Careful Conversations” exercise, students realized that learning to simply *listen*, without concurrently trying to think of a rebuttal or follow-up question, is both extraordinarily difficult and extraordinarily important. One student noted this exercise fostered a conversation that was “peaceful and calm.”<sup>29</sup> How, then, might her experience with a peaceful

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<sup>27</sup> Kevin Minister, interview with the authors, March 29, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> This student’s point is also clearly related to the theme of dialogue models addressed earlier in this paper. Many of the professors we observed seemed acutely aware of the importance of explicitly pointing out the links between

and calm interfaith conversation impact her future professional work? The student noted that “when dealing with a patient who doesn't have the same viewpoint, I can [now] more readily listen, and ask them for thoughts. It helps me practice what it's like to listen to someone whose worldview is very different from my own.”<sup>30</sup>

A course that illustrates an interesting combination of focus on institutional mission, substantial coursework, and post-graduation work is Womack's “Islam in America.” As stated earlier, the students in this course identified as Christian and were training for either Christian theological scholarship or ministry. Womack's course goals, therefore, revolve around emphasizing how scholarly study and research translate into practical application for students. Students can get “Islam 101” from the readings; the goal of the course is to “expose them to a diversity of thought and experiences,” to “let them find ways to answer the questions they came in with.”<sup>31</sup>

Womack emphasizes practical skill acquisition through the design of her assignments. For example, when she gives an assignment that requires critical engagement with sources—as when students are asked to write books reviews—she frames the assignment less as something that is designed to teach students to write in the style of an academic journal article (unless the student is on the Ph.D. track), but rather, asks them to think in terms of “something they would publish in a church newsletter that would recommend the book to members, putting it in their own unique voice.” She gives students room to sort through their own personal theological questions in their writing, but urges them to think about how the readings might relate to their vocational context. “A lot of students,” she explains, “come in knowing very little and wanting . . . to learn the history from the beginning. They may not appreciate it, but I try to tell them that's not what we're trying to do. That kind of knowledge is important. . . but it's so much more complicated than that. And ‘knowing’ about Islam doesn't mean that you know how to love your Muslim neighbor.” She emphasizes the ways in which understanding “the history of Islam in the US. . . applies to present-day issues, and the experiences of American Muslims.”<sup>32</sup>

For many people, it seems, “interfaith” glosses as “practical” or “applied.” While this is an oversimplification, there does seem to be some sort of underlying assertion that interfaith work is less focused on the theoretical, the “thinking about,” and more on the applied, or the “doing.” And this is where things often get hairy—and sometimes a little bit heated. Often without anyone saying it directly, one can hear implicit critiques—and, of course, sometimes the critiques are explicit—that focusing only on the practical or applied is not academically rigorous or responsible. Similarly, those who tend more toward the practical/applied might argue that remaining primarily within the realm of the theoretical will not do students much good when they are out in the workforce trying to figure out how to respond to “real world problems.” Might the “crisis in higher education,” then, be at the root of some of the disagreements about what courses in interfaith/interreligious studies should be doing? About what “interfaith/interreligious studies” actually means? About what the difference is between a “world

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dialogue skills and professional skills to students; in other words, they pointed out that dialogue skills *are* professional skills.

<sup>30</sup> Student Focus Group for Wakoh Hickey and Hannah Murphy Buc's *Caregiving at the End of Life* course, focus group with the authors, March 2, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Deanna Womack, interview with Jones, August 30, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

religions” or “introduction to religion” class and an “interfaith/interreligious studies” class?

In reflecting on these links between professional skills and interfaith/interreligious studies, we wonder:

- How using these links as a philosophical justification for a course’s creation might play on some campuses. How might various curriculum committees respond to course proposals with frameworks oriented around professional skills development in interfaith engagement?
- Might some faculty members’ desire to free themselves from what they see as higher education’s moving more and more toward a business model (in terms of marketing to parents and in terms of public discourse) lead them to eschew frameworks that emphasize the “practical”?
- On the other hand, might faculty members teaching at public/state universities find the framework of interfaith/interreligious studies’ being vital to the public square, vital to professions in a globalized world, and vital to diplomacy, more convincing in contexts where some stakeholders might be a little twitchy about courses that look too “religious” or too oriented around practice?

## **Theme 6: Students’ Personal Spiritual Journeys**

The question of how much space to allow for students to bring their own spiritual and ethical journeys into the classroom came up (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly) for each of the professors we interviewed. Their answers varied—again, often springing, at least in part, from their institutional contexts. Sometimes, professors experienced a common thread of pushback regarding course design: students often came into their interfaith/interreligious studies courses hoping for, or expecting, a “facts-based” approach, wanting to acquire a particular body of knowledge. On the other hand, many students expressed a desire to use this knowledge to explore their own religiosity. Barbara Walvoord’s 2007 study, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses*, identified a “great divide” between a similar expectation among students (about “fact-based” approaches and wanting to explore their own spiritual journeys) and professors’ chief focus on fostering critical thinking skills.<sup>33</sup>

How do Walvoord’s observations relate to what we observed among professors teaching courses in interfaith and interreligious studies? While many professors in our study also confronted some variation of Walvoord’s “great divide,” they varied in terms of how much they explicitly addressed students’ spiritual, religious, or identity formation in terms of course outcomes or learning goals. To put it into Walvoord’s language, professors varied as to whether students’ examining their own interior lives remained “*sub rosa*,” or whether the inevitability of their examining their own interior lives as a result of their learning was explicitly addressed in syllabi.

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<sup>33</sup> Barbara E. Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

In some courses, helping students connect to their spiritual/ethical heritage and understand more deeply their own spiritual journeys is described as an explicit goal (and also, sometimes, connects to either general education requirements or institutional mission). For example, the course description for Suzanne Henderson’s “Spiritual Storytelling” course reads as follows: “Our families of origin provide the foundation of our life patterns, beliefs, and worldviews. This learning community explores how the family legacy we inherit—our family quirks, traditions, and genes—shapes our relationship to the broader human family to which we also belong. Through the disciplines of research and writing, we’ll examine the family legacy as it orients us to the wider world.” The course learning outcomes, in turn, assert that by semester’s end, students will demonstrate:

- An appreciative grasp of a variety of faith and philosophical traditions;
- A complex understanding of the concept of religious identity and the role that families play in shaping it;
- An ability to articulate the value of meaningful engagement across different worldviews and belief systems;
- *Thoughtful, sophisticated reflection on their own spiritual or philosophical journeys in relation to their families of origins and the wider human family.*<sup>34</sup>

Both the structure of Henderson’s course and the readings she chooses for it place an emphasis on narrative, which then empowers students to begin both naming and claiming their own narratives. In Klancher’s “Introduction to Interfaith Studies” syllabus, students’ personal spiritual exploration is addressed within the description of course activities and requirements; and, notably, Klancher emphasizes that this self-exploration is to remain firmly within the realm of critical thinking skills development (application and analysis of theory, exploration of links to the course readings, and so on.). For example, students are required to keep a journal, and in her description of the journal assignment, Klancher explains that they are to create two sets of entries “that consider the foundational tenets—that is, the ethics and prescribed obligations—regarding religious others, coexistence, and peace within two of the religious traditions we study (one tradition per paper).” The pedagogical goal of the journals, she emphasizes, is for students to “focus on identifying theological (where relevant), spiritual, social, political, and historical determinants of such tenets, interpersonal or intergroup dynamics that (may) result, and, finally, the human implications—positive and negative—of each.” To really drive the critical thinking point home, she stipulates that while the journal entries can be “informal in diction and [encompass] the realm of emotion and personal perspective, journaling must remain rigorous in terms of logic and analysis.”<sup>35</sup> Like many of the professors we observed, Klancher opens up space for students to write expository papers in which they explore their own presuppositions, pre-existing hermeneutic lenses, and responses to experiences of actually talking to people they do not know very well about charged subjects. She sees doing so as a necessary tool related to students’ processing their own experiences of engaging in dialogue. In other courses, such as Cressler’s “Interfaith Atlanta Across the Color Line,” learning goals require students to both

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<sup>34</sup> Suzanne Henderson, *Spiritual Storytelling*, unpublished course syllabus. Emphasis ours.

<sup>35</sup> Nancy Klancher, “Introduction to Interfaith Studies,” unpublished syllabus.

cultivate skills for engagement and to interrogate different models of social change work. Because Cressler's course also includes an immersive experience in Atlanta, however, achieving the course's objectives requires that students learn how to do immersive or ethnographic work in a manner that acknowledges the hermeneutics of personal presuppositions, and encourages them to examine their own intersectional social locations. As in Klancher's class, spaces for Cressler's students to both debrief and to analyze their experiences of encounter are vital. But, as referenced earlier, Cressler works to "push them to be self-reflective and critical of the experiences, not just to enjoy their own self-development."<sup>36</sup>

A constant among the courses we observed was professors' acknowledgment that an important part of interfaith/interreligious work involves students' surfacing their own social/structural positionality and intersectionality, as well as their own feelings about religion. All the professors made space in their courses for students, in some way, to allow themselves to become aware of when and how their own reactions to things were shaping their responses. Many professors emphasized guiding students to develop better facility in recognizing and clearly articulating their own frameworks of reference and interpretation. Interesting questions and issues remain:

- Is there something distinctive about courses in interfaith/interreligious studies that addresses Walvoord's "great divide" differently than the more typical religious studies and theology courses?
- Students' confronting their own interior lives is an inevitability in interfaith/interreligious studies courses. In fact, it might be the case that developmentally, students' work on self-knowledge is a necessary precursor (or should run concurrently) to trying to know someone else (or other communities).
- If it is the case that students' confronting and examining their own interior lives and presuppositions is an inevitability, self-awareness and ongoing assessment by the instructor is key, in the sense of (1) an ongoing examination of what one is hoping students will get out of the course, (2) an ongoing examination of *why* one wants students to get certain things out of a course, and (3) an ongoing examination of whether or not the course readings, activities, etc. are doing the things one hoped they would do.
- We wonder if interfaith studies, by the nature of its approach or goals, lends itself to this kind of self-reflection in the classroom, and if so, how instructors should address or engage with student's spiritual journeys. If spiritual development is appropriate for the classroom, how can it be done well, and what might assessment or learning outcomes look like?

### **Theme 7: Personal Reflection or Self-Disclosure from the Instructor**

Although the religious/ethical identity of an instructor is perhaps always a question in a course on religion, this issue may be more at play in a course on interreligious topics where students are

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew Cressler, course observation by Meyer, May 24, 2017.

expected to analyze interfaith encounter and even have interfaith experiences in the classroom. The topic of professorial intersectionality and identity manifested in several different ways in our research.

Hickey chose to be very open about her identity as a Buddhist and brought personal religious reflection and experience into the course regularly. Her identity as a Buddhist practitioner, as well as her scholarly work and openness about the interweaving of these aspects of her life (personal and professional), afforded her a specific type of authority in the classroom.<sup>37</sup> Aslan, a Muslim who wears hijab and teaches courses on Islam, described having no choice but to self-disclose; she also emphasized that she is cognizant of the need to maintain an aura of objectivity for her students, many of whom are in their first years of college. Understandably, she feels that, in many ways, she must actively battle against students’ biases or assumptions. We observed that she did so in a gentle, quiet, and humor-laced way that accords with her manner in the classroom, but one cannot help but consider the additional toll this must take on her in the context of an already-demanding profession.

Cressler and Henderson were both very open about their own religious and ethical commitments, though if they had chosen to, they could have more easily concealed their identities than Aslan certainly and perhaps also Hickey (for whom it might have presented challenges to lead many of the contemplative practices without acknowledging her religious identity). Students in the focus groups said they loved knowing Cressler’s and Henderson’s commitments, and felt it contributed to their own ability to be honest and open in class discussion by watching their instructors model that. On the flipside, faculty who didn’t self-disclose religious commitments (Minister, primarily, but others, as well) found champions in their students who said they liked that they never knew what their instructors were *really* thinking.

One other interesting question that occurred to us revolves around other types of related (perceived) commitments: students’ perceptions of professors’ social justice stances and political views. One of the focus groups for Pennington’s course at Elon University, in particular, spent some time talking about a woman in their class who had said she didn’t feel comfortable expressing her views in class at all. She herself was not a member of the focus group, but the other students in the focus group talked about how her feelings probably mirrored the experiences of many other students across campus because of the climate of their school, as well as the national climate at the time of the interview. They also noted that the geographic location of Elon—it is in a particular part of North Carolina that could probably serve as an example for what people mean by a “purple state”—had to have impacted this student’s experiences, and also impacted the nature of the course and the considerations Pennington had to take into account when creating it.

One of the most interesting questions we find ourselves pondering is the degree to which instructors “self-disclose” their *sub rosa* goals (per Walvoord, above). Not surprisingly, this question is intimately related to institutional context: whether one teaches in a public, state-funded research university, a denominationally affiliated Christian private liberal arts college, a school that requires its faculty to make faith claims as a precondition for employment, etc. In addition, professors must give consideration to the inescapabilities of their bodies: whether

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<sup>37</sup> Wakoh Hickey and Hannah Buc Murphy, Interview with the authors, March 2, 2017.

students perceive them as being young or old (to the degree that perception of age relates to perceptions of authority); how students perceive their professors' gender identities; whether a professor's mode of dress makes his or her religious commitments at least somewhat apparent to others; whether one is perceived as "white" or not; and so on. And, of course, as everyone who teaches about religion realizes sooner or later, instructors themselves simply have to confront their own experiences and feelings about whatever these things are that we call "religion" and "faith," and how they have experienced them in their own lives, especially when immersed in these topics day after day, trying to figure out what in the world these students should be taking away from the classroom. Other questions present themselves as well.

- To what extent do courses on interfaith/interreligious studies make normative claims about religious pluralism as a civic good? As a theological good? And does this matter?
- College and university mission statements are rife with normative claims. Are claims advocating religious pluralism somehow qualitatively different?
- Further, to what extent do (or should) questions of interfaith engagement intersect with questions about race?
- What happens when multiple models of social justice that lie in the subtext of a syllabus contradict one another—or, at least, stand in tension with one another?

### **Concluding Thoughts: Reflections from the Gathering and Beyond**

In our original conclusion to this piece, intended for the faculty gathering in Fall 2018, we reflected, "Pedagogical intentions will—and perhaps should—change over time as professors themselves (and the students they tend to encounter) change over time." As we read back over our work in preparation for publication—delayed, like so many things, by the COVID-19 pandemic—we cannot help but reflect on how two of the themes that emerged as most salient at our gathering continue to be so. And the question we would want to ask our colleagues would be: how have the last three years changed your approach to teaching these topics or answering the questions we wrestled with at our gathering?

The first theme on which much of our conversation focused was a deep desire to understand firsthand one another's work in the classroom. In other words, the faculty gathered wished they could have the experiences of seeing each other teaching, hearing from one another's students, and honing their pedagogical work together. For many of the individuals gathered at the conference, they were the only person in their institution thinking seriously about interreligious and interfaith pedagogies, and the opportunity to be with colleagues and thought partners, thinking constructively, debating nuances and priorities for the field proved invaluable. In response, the Wabash Center funded multiple collaborative projects between and among institutions for precisely this kind of learning, by developing Cohorts of Inter-Religious Learning, an initiative which concluded with the Spring Semester of 2020. With a year of academic Zoom conferences under our belts, we now wonder what new opportunities can be found and created for scholars to gather together and learn from one another firsthand. How might what we are doing in interreligious and interfaith classrooms create opportunities for rebuilding and



reconnecting after year of so much distance and disconnection?

The second major theme that emerged at the conference was tension around the intersection between interfaith and interreligious studies and other areas of diversity, most notably race, but also gender and sexual orientation. Indeed, the conversation became quite heated and at one point the group needed to break before continuing; much of this tension remained unresolved.

At the heart of the conversation was the question of whether there is a way to think about religious diversity without also thinking about race, especially when discussing religious diversity in the American context. (See, for example, Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s argument that much of the making of the US was a Christian project focused on tying race to religious othering).<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, for some of our colleagues gathered, ignoring this reality made interfaith and interreligious studies at best a Pollyanna-ish view of diversity and relationships across difference and at worst a way to ignore and even perpetuate some of the deepest, systemic challenges of race and diversity in favor of “cooperation”. On the other hand, many of the scholars gathered—who were primarily white and either identified as Christian or came from Christian backgrounds—felt ill-equipped both to engage with race and religion deeply and fully, or to make academic connections between religious diversity and other types of diversity. This was beyond their area of expertise and focusing on religious diversity was appropriate for their disciplinary approach; it was not a matter of ignoring the realities of systemic racism, but rather, they felt, recognizing the boundaries of their own academic expertise.

Again, this is an area where we would love to ask our colleagues: “So, how has your teaching changed over the last three years?” We suspect that in light of the increased emphasis on confronting racial injustice in America, as well as the demands to confront structural racism students are making on many of their campus leaders, that the clean divide between “interfaith” and other kinds of diversity may not be as easy to make. We wonder if some of our colleagues who were not previously comfortable engaging with race or other areas of diversity and identity have, as we have in our own work, worked to build their own expertise in order to engage students—or if, perhaps, their institutions have opened up space and financial support in ways that will allow them to do so. Indeed, the interfaith movement in the United States more broadly has shown an increasing attention to racial justice, and we are curious if this is being mirrored in our classrooms.

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<sup>38</sup> Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “The Promising Practice of Antiracist Approaches to Interfaith Studies,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies*, 139.



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