

Negotiating the Applied/Theoretical Dilemma at the Intersection of Interreligious Studies and Global Citizenship: A Response to Jones and Meyer¹

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In their essay “Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment,” Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer invite us to consider seven themes that emerged from their study of the pedagogies and practices that structure the emerging field of Interreligious Studies. I respond to by focusing principally on how the goals and practices of Elon University’s Multifaith Scholars program intersect with their fifth theme: “Connecting to Professional Skills.” Considering how students’ intercultural and multifaith learning contributes to their development of critical skills and preparation for diverse career paths in a globalized world also allows me to reflect on how we have attempted to navigate the tensions between the “practical” and “applied” on the one hand, and the “theoretical” and “academically rigorous” on the other.

Keywords: pedagogy, practices, professional skills, mentoring, intercultural learning, capstone, religion, interreligious studies, multifaith, interfaith learning

Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer invite us to consider seven themes that emerged from their study of the pedagogies and practices that structure the emerging field of Interreligious Studies. These themes were distilled from their site visits to eight institutions that included class observations, instructor interviews, and student focus groups. Their insights sharpened during a culminating two-day, in-person convening of twenty-five scholars who teach interreligious studies courses, administer these programs, or are engaged in the field more broadly. We were pleased to host the research team at Elon University, where they observed Brian K. Pennington teaching the capstone course of our Interreligious Studies minor and interacted with students in the Multifaith Scholars program that I direct.

In this short response to Jones and Meyer, I focus principally on how the goals and practices of Elon’s Multifaith Scholars program intersect with their fifth theme: “Connecting to Professional Skills.” Although we have only admitted five classes of students into the Multifaith Scholars program at this point, our assessment data offer fertile material for considering how the program’s practices contribute to advancing the skills associated both with a liberal arts education and with career readiness. Taking up questions about how cultivating students’ religious literacy relates to their development of critical professional skills also allows me to reflect on how we have attempted to navigate the tensions between the “practical” and “applied” on the one hand, and the “theoretical” and “academically rigorous” on the other, tensions that Jones and Meyer note persist in interreligious studies contexts. My reflections on these abiding tensions compel me to comment also on the pedagogies related to students’ personal spiritual journeys included in the authors’ sixth theme; this leads me to suggest lessons that we might derive from the academic literature on mentoring as we seek to navigate this terrain. I propose that some balance across institutional mission, program and course goals, and student identities may be achieved if we take our cues from students themselves about their learning and personal needs.

¹ This essay is part of a series of responses to the article by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer, “Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment,” in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, no. 36 (May 2022): 9-34. To view the entire issue, visit <http://irstudies.org>.

Their identities—in particular, whether and how they orient around religion—ought to inform their intercultural and multifaith learning and the modes through which they build the capacity to engage across difference in preparation for diverse career paths in a globalized world. Evidence from Elon’s Multifaith Scholars program suggests that by being responsive to students themselves and scaffolding multifaith learning in developmentally appropriate ways, we can effectively prepare graduates to be civically engaged and globally adept multifaith leaders primed for leadership in the public square.

Institutional Context

At the opening of their paper, Jones and Meyer report that “institutional context shapes everything,” from curriculum to course goals and teaching strategies.² We also know that it has very real effects on the resources available for the development of courses and programs. At Elon we have been fortunate in this regard, as our institution has offered crucial material support as well as thought leadership to create a rich curricular and co-curricular environment for innovative interreligious learning. The university’s commitment to engaging the campus in multifaith learning was explicitly articulated in its 2010 strategic plan and advanced by the formation of the academic Center for the Study of Religion, Culture & Society two years later as well as the dedication of a purpose-built multifaith center in 2013. We began offering an interdisciplinary minor in Interreligious Studies in 2016³ and established the Multifaith Scholars program in 2017 as a closely mentored, experientially rich, and academically rigorous opportunity for juniors and seniors to engage across religious difference and become socially engaged multifaith leaders.⁴ The ten juniors and seniors in the Multifaith Scholars cohort come from many majors and backgrounds and their religious commitments range from observant believers to secular “nones” and atheists. The two-year multidisciplinary program has four key components: 1) academic coursework (every scholar either majors in Religious Studies or minors in Interreligious Studies); 2) faculty-mentored undergraduate research; 3) community partnerships (e.g., with our local mosque); and 4) campus leadership (senior scholars share their learning with the campus community in diverse fora). Each student is offered \$10,000 in scholarship over the two years to support their research and related experiences. While the number of students directly impacted by the Multifaith Scholars program is relatively small, Elon’s current strategic plan articulates a much more expansive vision. Building on more than a decade of efforts around and investments in intercultural and interfaith learning, it charges us to “engage all students, faculty, and staff in advancing their intercultural and multifaith learning and competencies” by 2030.⁵ A Multifaith Strategic Planning process is currently underway to determine what structures and learning opportunities are required to realize this ambitious goal.

² Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer, “Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment,” in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, no. 36 (May 2022), 10.

³ Amy L. Allocco, Geoffrey D. Claussen, and Brian K. Pennington, “Constructing Interreligious Studies: Thinking Critically about Interfaith Studies and the Interfaith Movement” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, eds. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 36–48.

⁴ Allocco, Amy L. and Brian K. Pennington, “Mentored Undergraduate Research: A Signature Pedagogy for Interreligious Studies” in *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, ed. Lucinda Mosher (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2022), 356–67.

⁵ Elon University, “Boldly Elon: Our Strategic Plan for 2030,” <https://www.elon.edu>, last modified 2021, <https://www.elon.edu/u/administration/president/boldly-elon/thrive/>.

Abiding Tensions

Building on the questions raised by Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman in the introduction to their co-edited *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (2018), Jones and Meyer suggest in their paper that interfaith and interreligious studies might be “particularly concerned with the applied nature of interreligious engagement.”⁶ They highlight the characteristics of interfaith studies that Peace identifies as making this field “more than an academic exercise”—for example, valuing scholarship that is accountable to community, the dynamic connection between theory and practice, and the centrality of relationships—as a departure point for their analysis of the pedagogies and practices operative in this new field.⁷

These characteristics are not, of course, unique to interfaith studies: they are the same commitments that animate feminist anthropology, for example, and that have guided my own approach to long-term ethnographic research in one region of Hindu South India.⁸ But there are other critical distinctions that help us to characterize interfaith and interreligious studies more precisely and to demarcate its aims and commitments more clearly from those of religious studies and theology. Paul Hedges suggests that interreligious studies can be seen as “an interface” between a more traditionally more secular Religious Studies discipline, and a more traditionally confessional theological discipline.⁹ Deanna Ferree Womack proposes that interfaith studies may in fact function as a “point of connection and reconciliation between religious studies and theology” because it equips students with (and here she quotes Eboo Patel) “the knowledge base and skill set needed to engage religious diversity in a way that promotes peace, stability, and cooperation.”¹⁰ Engagement and affective knowledge are key for Womack, and she suggests that these priorities, as well as an emphasis on practical application (rather than the privileging of cognitive abilities as seen in classical approaches to religious studies) distinguish the emerging field of interfaith studies.¹¹

While the applied nature of interreligious studies and its relative balance of theory and practice continue to raise thorny questions that have recently been taken up by key thinkers in this developing field,¹² I would argue that we need not succumb to binary thinking on these matters. Rather, we might instead attune our course/program goals and pedagogies to fit not only institutional mission and departmental focus but also student interests and needs. These complex alignments are vital to each of the pedagogical themes and practices from interreligious studies courses and programs that the authors enumerate, but they are perhaps especially crucial

⁶ Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, “Introduction:” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, xi–xii.

⁷ Jones and Meyer, 10.

⁸ Allocco, Amy L., “Shifting Technologies of Reflection: Intergenerational Relationships and the Entanglements of Field and Home,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 15, no. 1–2 (2020): 159–79.

⁹ Paul Hedges, “Interreligious Studies,” in *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, ed. Anne LC Runehov and Lluís Oviedo (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 1077. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8265-8_1676.

¹⁰ Deanna Ferree Womack, “From the History of Religions to Interfaith Studies: A Theological Educator’s Exercise in Adaptation,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, 16–17.

¹¹ Womack, “From the History of Religions to Interfaith Studies,” 20.

¹² Two insightful treatments of these issues are McCarthy, Kate, “Secular Imperatives,” in *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field*, ed. Hans Gustafson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 171–77 and Pennington, Brian K., “The Interreligious Studies Agenda: Three Dilemmas,” in *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, ed. Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022) 15–23.

in our efforts to leverage classroom and programmatic learning for “real world” application, facilitate professional skills, and prepare students for diverse career paths in a globalized world. In what follows, I consider what assessment data from student monthly reflections, our annual tracking of learning outcomes, semi-annual assessments of mentors and mentoring practices, and an external assessment of the program indicate about how a developmental, blended approach that offers instrumental and psychosocial supports that take account of student identities can produce knowledgeable, high-achieving multifaith leaders with valuable professional skills.

Navigating Mission and Goals

Elon is a non-sectarian independent university whose mission statement describes an academic community committed to transforming “mind, body, and spirit;” putting knowledge into practice; fostering respect for human difference; and preparing students to be “global citizens and informed leaders motivated by concern for the common good.”¹³ As one outgrowth of these institutional values, our well-supported campus multifaith initiative includes rich co-curricular offerings as well as robust curricular, research, and academic programming opportunities. From its location in Academic Affairs, the Multifaith Scholars program supports students’ personal and academic development as they combine coursework with a faculty-mentored, two-year undergraduate research project that entails work alongside, and study with, different religious communities in diverse global contexts, both domestic and international.

Grounded in Elon’s “relationship-rich” campus culture,¹⁴ the program privileges a “constellation” model of mentoring where multiple mentors provide a blend of challenge and support to catalyze scholars’ learning and development.¹⁵ Members of scholars’ constellations typically include their research mentor(s), the program director, their peers within the cohort, and mentors beyond the campus drawn from our community partnership, the religious communities where students conduct research, and the program’s alumni corps. Students benefit from sustained, developmental forms of instrumental and psychosocial support that foster professional development and set the stage for their career and other pathways.

¹³ Elon University, “Mission Statement,” <https://www.elon.edu>, last modified 2021, <https://www.elon.edu/u/administration/mission-statement/>.

¹⁴ Felten, Peter, and Leo M. Lambert, *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

¹⁵ On mentoring constellations, see Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler’s recent blog post, <https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/mentoring-for-learner-success-conceptualizing-constellations/>. For more on the operationalization of this model in Elon’s Multifaith Scholars program see Allocco and Pennington, “Mentored Undergraduate Research” and Allocco, Amy L., Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler, Eric Hall, Caroline Ketcham, Mussa Idris, Jennifer A. Hamel and David J. (Sandy) Marshall, “Undergraduate Research in the Global Context: Models and Practices for High Quality Mentoring,” *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 30m No. 1 (2022): 106–23. DOI: [10.1080/13611267.2022.2031084](https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2022.2031084). Other relevant studies include Kram, Kathy E. and Belle Rose Ragins, “The Landscape of Mentoring in the 21st Century,” in *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. Belle Rose Ragins and Kathy E. Kram (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008) 659–92; Nicholson, Brittany A., Meagen Pollack, Caroline J. Ketcham, Heather M. Fitz Gibbon, Evan D. Bradley, and Michelle Bata, “Beyond the Mentor-Mentee Model: A Case for Multi-Mentoring in Undergraduate Research,” *PURM: Perspectives of Undergraduate Research Mentoring* 6, no. 1 (2017), 1–14 (https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/undergraduate-research/purm/wp-content/uploads/sites/923/2019/06/Nicholson_et_al_6.1.pdf); and Palmer, Ruth J., Andrea N. Hunt, Michael Neal, and Brad Weutherick, “Mentoring, Undergraduate Research, and Identity Development: A Conceptual Review and Research Agenda,” *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 23, no. 5 (2015): 411–26.

One Scholar’s Path Toward Global Citizenship

The example of “Kathryn” (a recent graduate of Multifaith Scholars) will help to illustrate the interplay of the program’s components and the role mentoring constellations played in staging her two-year experience. Kathryn applied to the program as a double major in Political Science and International and Global Studies with a Middle East concentration and several semesters of Arabic to her credit. Kathryn and her primary mentor designed a research project that asked how the flows of migrant workers from South India to the Gulf States are shaping the multireligious landscape of both contexts. She declared the minor in Interreligious Studies and pursued coursework in Islam and Hinduism to complement her project’s focus, adding a secondary layer of academic mentors with complementary areas of expertise to her constellation. Building on a semester of study abroad in North India in her junior year (where she interacted closely with an additional mentor) as well as training in ethnographic methods, Kathryn successfully secured summer funding to support one month of participant-observer fieldwork and interviews in South India focused on her research question.

During that time, Kathryn recorded fifty-five extended interviews about interreligious relationships and documented shifts in styles of religious architecture and dress in response to Gulf migration. She also worked with several mentors in the communities where she conducted research, including her translator, a college student about her own age who functioned as something of a peer mentor. Kathryn’s ethnographic fieldwork suggested that although intercommunity contact and exchange among Hindu, Christian, and Muslim migrants became more pronounced while individuals were in their new Gulf contexts, these flows ultimately contributed to more concretized religious boundaries back home in South India.¹⁶ Kathryn’s research outcomes included a presentation at the Southeastern Regions American Academy of Religion conference and two peer-reviewed journal articles.¹⁷ Throughout her two years as a Multifaith Scholar, Kathryn’s focus remained primarily academic: exploring her own religious orientations in relation to program activities did not emerge as a priority, and she highlighted self-confidence and efficacy as the most important aspects of personal development that the program facilitated for her. Whereas Kathryn could identify clear connections between multifaith engagement and her desire to become the sort of informed global citizen concerned with the common good described in Elon’s mission statement, for her those orientations were related to skill acquisition and career preparation rather than religious identity. Although a minority of students in the program orient around their own religio-spiritual commitments, Kathryn favored the development of professional competencies over reflection on her personal faith journey. Even before she graduated, Kathryn could capably articulate connections between her multifaith learning, mentoring experiences, and career readiness. Her post-graduate path shows direct correlations to her studies at Elon and her Multifaith Scholars research and community-based learning: She was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to research the King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Co-Existence in Bahrain and a Department of State Critical Language Scholarship for

¹⁶ Gerry, Kathryn B., “Navigating Multireligious Landscapes in Kerala and the Gulf in Light of Migration,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 45, no. 2 (2021): 1–16.

¹⁷ Gerry, “Navigating Multireligious Landscapes,” and Gerry, Kathryn B., “‘We become capable of handling everything’: Gender and Gulf Migration in Kerala, South India,” *Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography* 11, no. 3 (2021) 36-53 (<https://ojs.library.dal.ca/JUE/article/view/11242>).

Arabic language study in Oman and is currently enrolled in the Security Studies graduate program at Georgetown University while also working in the defense consulting field in Washington, DC.

Mentoring as a Catalyst for Integration

Much like Kathryn's, many of the Multifaith Scholars' research projects—such as those analyzing Islamophobia in the U.S. airline industry, the religious identities of Cambodian Americans, Jewish responses to white nationalist movements, and refugee and resettlement issues—examine and address the challenges of living in religiously diverse communities and a world often in conflict. They therefore connect directly to the elements of the University's mission statement cited above as well as to articulated program goals that emphasize building religious literacy and a sophisticated knowledge about multifaith issues that can be applied and practiced in real world settings. Indeed, from its inception, the Multifaith Scholars program has foregrounded its goal of training intellectually curious and socially engaged multifaith leaders who are prepared to navigate and problem-solve in a religiously diverse and conflicted world. To facilitate this preparation, students are encouraged to complement their undergraduate research projects with high-impact engaged and experiential learning opportunities such as study abroad or study away, internships, and community-based learning in diverse local and global contexts.¹⁸ The goal of this integration is to prepare scholars to not only assume active campus leadership roles and share multifaith learning with their Elon peers in their senior year, but also to translate their knowledge and skills into professional contexts.

Although these academic and leadership capacities are developed synergistically through the program's four key components, the guidance and opportunities for rigorous reflection provided by scholars' mentors buttress and extend them and offer vital opportunities for their integration. Research suggests that successful mentoring relationships are developmental and dynamic, offering appropriate forms of challenge and support in response to new contexts and identities to facilitate the acquisition of skills and competencies.¹⁹ In the context of mentoring in the workplace, for example, Kathy E. Kram points to the effectiveness of combining three types of mentoring: instrumental mentoring involving career-oriented and professional skill-building; psychosocial mentoring to advance interpersonal competencies and identity development; and relational mentoring that is reciprocal and dynamic.²⁰ This blended approach directly informs the Multifaith Scholars mentoring model, which aims to be responsive to student identities, productively negotiate tensions between the theoretical and the applied, and position students for diverse careers in a complex world.

Connecting Interreligious Learning to Career Readiness

In theme five of their paper, Jones and Meyer observe that the emergence of the field of interreligious studies has coincided with a period of tumult and uncertainty in higher education,

¹⁸ George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008).

¹⁹ Gloria Crisp, Vicki L. Baker, Kimberly A. Griffin, Laura Gail Lunsford, and Meghan J. Pifer, *Mentoring Undergraduate Students: ASHE Higher Education Report* 43 no. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

²⁰ Kathy E. Kram, *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

as colleges and universities have struggled to defend the very value of a liberal education, respond to a rapidly changing job market, and remain financially viable in light of enrollment challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹ Pressing questions about how the liberal arts, and particularly the humanities, are preparing students for careers in a shifting national and global economic landscape require a kind of communications precision and expert translation of the central pillars of a liberal arts education into the specific professional skills sought especially by parents and employers. Academics, however, rarely feel adequately prepared for such communications and translation. Although the language of professional preparation and career readiness was not previously my native vernacular, the fact that the Multifaith Scholars program was framed with explicit reference to the practical and applied dimensions of intercultural and multifaith competencies meant that I have had to become increasingly comfortable thinking through and articulating these frameworks.

The scholars themselves are of great help in this regard because the language of application in real world contexts resonates strongly with them. They can easily explain how their specific research outcomes, which have been quite impressive in the program’s short tenure, help them develop concrete skills and proficiencies that will prove useful in their future professional contexts. Given their varied majors and career aspirations as well as the articulated needs of the communities with whom they have conducted their research, the products of their work are appropriately diverse. In the two most recent graduating classes of Multifaith Scholars, nine scholars have delivered eighteen external conference presentations, published seven peer-reviewed journal articles, and won several prizes for their conference papers, multimedia websites, and ethnographic research. They have also demonstrated a significant interest in public scholarship and have produced op-eds and popular journalistic pieces; photo exhibits and short documentaries; and curricula, white papers, and learning modules developed in collaboration with the religious communities and non-profit organizations with whom they have worked.

Students have also been adept at discerning how their broader multifaith and diversity fluencies will be valuable in careers such as public relations, national security, and public health. In an assessment reflection, for example, one senior wrote that she is convinced her cohort’s developing multifaith competencies will translate well beyond their current academic context. In her words, “In every future position we will hold, we will likely be functioning within a diverse, multifaith, intersectional world—among colleagues, neighbors, and bosses—and these skills will help us in navigating those interactions. In terms of leadership, having cultivated these competencies will help me to continue to learn with others and also guide them toward a more inclusive and accepting world.”

A Computer Science major pursuing a data science project that applies Social Network Analysis methods to study the Christian Identity extremist movement can identify in specific terms how the religious literacy she has built through her Interreligious Studies coursework and community-based learning has deepened her research project and contributed to her personal development. She is convinced that these skills, and the ability to effectively communicate their relationship to her disciplinary and technical skills, will be advantageous as she competes for

²¹ Jones and Meyer, 25.

graduate fellowships and enters the job market in her chosen field.²² Other current scholars envision applying their intercultural agility and religious literacy in international diplomacy, the film industry, fashion design, journalism, and the performing arts. They will soon join the three classes of Multifaith Scholars alumni, who have been awarded prestigious fellowships; gone on to excellent law schools and graduate programs in religion, public health, international relations, and public relations with significant scholarships; and accepted jobs in refugee resettlement, interfaith organizing, and the technology sector. These graduates' continued connection to the program provides opportunities for us to appreciate how their training prepared them for further study and careers. One recent alumna, for example, shared how her extended interactions and research in Muslim communities as a Multifaith Scholar empowered her to speak up in a law school course on domestic violence when she was uncomfortable with how course readings characterized Islam. Another posted to our alumni group chat to share how she had described the capacities she developed in the Multifaith Scholars program—and all she had learned from members of her cohort—in a second-round interview for a summer internship with the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Personal Faith and Positionality

The relevance of students' own personal faith journeys and the strategies for integrating them into interfaith and interreligious studies courses are topics that Jones and Meyer take up under their sixth theme.²³ Here, again, institutional context is key, as are course goals and learning outcomes. Whereas in some settings these discussions and reflections about individual faith commitments might be entirely appropriate and even essential to essential students' learning and development, in Elon's Multifaith Scholars program they would be less salient. To be sure, the authors make it clear that instructors who make space for such self-exploration in their classes emphasize the development of critical thinking skills, the interrogation of students' own presuppositions and lenses, and the ability to connect such reflections to theory and course readings. These emphases fit well with our program foci, but the subject of analysis is far more often a campus lecture, a reading, a research experience, or an encounter at the local mosque than it is one's own religious identity. Although I absolutely concur with the shared view of professors who Jones and Meyer interviewed during their site visits that it is important for students to acknowledge their own "social/structural positionality and intersectionality" and recognize their "frameworks of reference and interpretation,"²⁴ in the Multifaith Scholars program we would not privilege religious commitment as one of the categories of evaluation unless students themselves identified it as pertinent.

Not recognizing one's own religious commitments and identities as germane to multifaith learning and encounter can, of course, be an outgrowth of the privilege afforded to those who belong to dominant religiosities—including, in many contexts, the "none" category. The privilege associated with majority community membership can produce stances that range from a general lack of self-awareness to an actual refusal to cultivate self-conscious and critical

²² This student's awareness about the far-reaching implications that her interreligious research and learning will have resonates with Womack's point that interfaith studies can serve as a bridge that links religion to STEM fields and pre-professional degree programs by facilitating students' development of skill sets that are directly relevant to careers in fields far beyond the humanities. See Womack, "From the History of Religions to Interfaith Studies," 24.

²³ Jones and Meyer, 28.

²⁴ Jones and Meyer, 30.

perspectives. We would do well to heed Hedges’ call for scholars in interreligious studies to “exercise a kind of hermeneutical suspicion about privileged starting points,” particularly since we know that the identities that most often “pass” uninterrogated are the normatively powerful ones associated with whiteness and Christianity.²⁵ That luxury is much less consistently available to racialized and otherwise minoritized scholars and students and to those whose religious commitments are visible or otherwise legible even before they disclose them. As the cohort of Multifaith Scholars continues to grow more diverse—religiously, ethnically, racially, and in terms of gender and sexual identification—every year, we will need to continue to consider how to most effectively encourage and facilitate critical conversations around power and privilege.

Some Multifaith Scholars do already bring these topics to the fore, such as the Creative Writing major whose project entails retracing the pilgrimage to Catholic sites in Ireland that he undertook with his father shortly before his father’s death. He will produce a portfolio of poetry at these sites that attempts to reconcile his new pagan and atheist worldviews with his father’s Catholicism in light of his grief and loss. While this vulnerable and personal project explicitly foregrounded religious identity from the outset, another clear example of a student whose religious commitments became germane in her research process did not initially anticipate these questions becoming so significant. This Multifaith Scholar conducted extended ethnographic research and recorded 45 interviews with college-age Muslims in North Carolina to understand how they negotiate their religious identities in the face of stigmatization, Islamophobia, and political and social turmoil.²⁶ Over the course of her project she struggled to square her Christian identity with Trump-era anti-Muslim rhetoric, policies, and violence and discussed these challenges regularly with her research mentor and Elon’s chaplains. In the “About” section of her award-winning website, she describes herself as “a trained journalist and a practicing Christian seeking to understand how my occupational community and religious community have been impacting a religious group in such destructive ways,” thereby suggesting that questions about her positionality directly informed her research focus.²⁷ Although other students in the program may not center or engage with their own religious backgrounds quite as explicitly, their upbringing and identities sometimes surface in their projects and in moments of interreligious encounter.

By and large, however, Multifaith Scholars resist reflexivity around their faith in cohort and individual settings. Where some students appear to find reflection on their spiritual and religious identities irrelevant within program contexts, and others engage with them directly or indirectly, still others perceive such personal discussions as troubling or alienating and potentially even harmful, given their own prior religious experiences. I would suggest here, then, that while it is possible to rigorously attend to positionality and engage in intersectional reflection about students’ frames of reference and interpretation, spiritual self-disclosure is not *required* for this pursuit and may not be appropriate for some students’ needs. Instead, indexing pedagogy and mentoring strategies to student identities with an eye toward individually appropriate career competencies offers one productive pathway for negotiating the perceived divide between the practical/applied and the theoretical. This sort of responsiveness to students’ own articulations

²⁵ Hedges, “Interreligious Studies,” 1078.

²⁶ Marjorie Anne Foster, “Negotiating Islamophobia: The Experiences of College-Age Muslims in North Carolina,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 45 no. 1 (2021): 45–59.

²⁷ Marjorie Anne Foster, “Meeting Muslims” <https://www.meetingmuslimsnc.com/about>.

about their needs allows us to scaffold multifaith learning in developmentally appropriate ways so that we can best prepare them to be civically engaged and globally adept multifaith leaders primed for leadership in the public square.

Calibrating Pedagogies for Global Citizenship

Jones's and Meyer's distillation of the array of pedagogical strategies they encountered in their study is a rich offering to all of us who teach interreligious studies courses, administer related programs, and are otherwise engaged in this developing field. Its publication coincides with a widespread rethinking of many accepted pedagogies in light of the twin pandemics—COVID-19 and systemic racism—and an acute awareness of the urgent questions and challenges that those committed to interreligious learning will need to grapple with in this landscape.²⁸ The authors' encouragement to critically reflect on how cultivating students' religious literacy relates to their development of critical professional skills spurs us to consider again the persistent tensions between the applied and the theoretical in interreligious studies contexts as well as the salience of attending to students' religious identities. As educators who are actively committed to producing global citizens poised to address religious diversity in productive and creative ways in their chosen career fields and participate with knowledge and self-awareness in civic contexts, how ought we negotiate these important questions? Here I have suggested that some balance across institutional mission, program and course goals, and student identities may be achieved by taking our cues from students themselves about their learning and personal needs. Through teaching and mentoring approaches that are responsive to their identities, including whether and how they orient around religion, we can offer intercultural and multifaith learning opportunities that build students' personal and professional competencies as well as their capacity to engage across difference in preparation for diverse career paths in a globalized world.



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²⁸ Amy L. Allocco, Brian Pennington, Hans Gustafson, Matt Maruggi, and Marty Stortz, “A Tale of Two Pandemics,” <https://ifyc.org/>, last modified 2020, <https://ifyc.org/article/tale-two-pandemics>.