

The Successfulness of a Descriptive Approach: A Response to Jones and Meyer¹

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This article discusses the successfulness of the descriptive (rather than critical) approach taken by Jones and Meyer in their assessment of interfaith/interreligious pedagogies in advancing dual goals: “[bringing] other instructors metaphorically into the classrooms that they observed” and “[exploring] 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.”

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The article, “Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies,” by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer represents a rich, engaging contribution to scholarship on teaching and learning as related to the field of interfaith and interreligious studies. Given that the field itself remains an emerging and loosely defined area of study, it is not surprising that the pedagogies captured within this article are also plural, dynamic, and sometimes in tension with one another.² Partly for this reason, Jones and Meyer seek to be more descriptive than critical in their writing. The authors’ descriptive approach is meant to advance dual goals: “[bringing] other instructors metaphorically into the classrooms that they observed” and “[exploring] 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.” My reading of this article found the authors to be successful in both areas.

There is much to be admired and discussed in relation to the Jones/Meyer article; it will no doubt provide fodder for ongoing conversation among educators for years to come. In my own brief response to this work, I will explain my own background and the institutional context(s) out of which I operate. From there, I will call attention to what I see as the most powerful contributions of this article: the cataloguing of various pedagogical approaches and activities as well as the focus in this article (and the field of interfaith and interreligious studies by extension) on cultivating students’ agency inside and outside the classroom. Lastly, I will highlight some of the areas in which I believe further exploration is warranted, especially as related to the assessment strategies being deployed in these classes and dynamics of power and privilege.

Early on in their article, Jones and Meyer note that “institutional context shapes everything” and, towards the end of their analysis, they unpack the significance of an educator’s positionality in relation to particular pedagogical approaches. Thus, I feel compelled to begin my response to their article by framing my own commitments and institutional affiliations, which have undoubtedly shaped my engagement with their work. I am trained as an anthropologist of religion with expertise in American religion and religion in the wake of mass tragedies. My personal interest in interfaith and interreligious studies began during my time as a graduate

¹This 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>.

² See, for example: Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018) and Hans Gustafson, *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020).

student at Harvard Divinity School, where I worked for more than two years as a research fellow with the Pluralism Project. Learning from Diana Eck, Ellie Pierce, and other groundbreaking scholars at this nonprofit afforded me my first insights into the case study method and, more generally, the complex realities of religious diversity and pluralism in the United States today.

Since earning my doctorate, I have worked as a teaching professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego (USD). USD is a private Catholic university that strives to “set the standard for a contemporary Catholic university confronting humanity’s urgent challenges.”³ My university is committed to liberal arts education and promotes values such as engaged scholarship, educational equity and inclusion, and, more generally, the spirit and practice of changemaking. I personally teach courses on world religions and American religious history while also overseeing an interdisciplinary initiative that works to study and address homelessness in our local community. Many of the courses that I have designed and taught carry the core curriculum flag for diversity, inclusion, and social justice, meaning that they include content about topics such as race, ethnicity, nationality, social location, and intersectionality.

Like many non-tenure track faculty members, my teaching and work have also extended into other institutional contexts. I have taught community college classes, offered online courses—both synchronously and asynchronously—at public universities, and served as a religion instructor at an independent college preparatory Episcopal day school. Currently, in addition to my work at USD, I teach synchronous graduate-level seminary courses online for United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and asynchronous undergraduate-level courses online for Springfield College (MA). I also serve as the co-chair of the Teaching Religion Unit of the American Academy of Religion, a position that puts me into conversation with educators across the nation and world. Thus, I bring my perspective and experiences from all these roles to bear upon my reading of Janiec Jones and Meyer’s article.

One of the greatest gifts that “Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies” offers readers is its cataloguing of what is happening in various classes affiliated with interfaith and interreligious studies across the United States. Drawing from the work of Jennifer Howe Peace, who argues that interfaith studies is a “field that values scholarship accountable to community, the dynamic link between theory and practice, and the centrality of relationships at every level,” Jones and Meyer illuminate the different activities and approaches that instructors are utilizing to craft courses and learning outcomes aligned with these values. Role-playing games, site visits and tours, spiritual autobiographies, case studies, public deliberation, analysis of online debates, the creation of congregational resources/programs, guest speakers, and scripted interviews are among the many classroom activities and assignments described, providing a veritable gold mine of ideas for those teaching similar courses. Along the way, the authors also raise important questions about what is at stake in deploying these techniques. One question that resonated with my own teaching has to do with how much space professors should allow for students to weave in their own spiritual journeys as part of their coursework. Especially in my graduate-level seminary class, I often find myself encouraging my students to move beyond personal reflection and storytelling to deeper forms of critical thinking. I ask students to not only describe or reflect on

³ “Envisioning 2024: Overview,” University of San Diego, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.sandiego.edu/envisioning-2024/overview/>.

their religious and/or spiritual identities, but also to demonstrate justice-oriented critical analysis. I want to see how the course content is helping learners analyze their social location or positionality in ways that are attentive to both personal and structural transformation. The questions and approaches discussed in this section of the paper provided context for the tensions I occasionally encounter and new strategies with which I might experiment, such as journaling that “remain[s] rigorous in terms of logic and analysis.”

Another noteworthy aspect of this article is its attention to the ways in which instructors in interfaith and interreligious studies courses are seeking to cultivate a sense of agency among the students in their classrooms. This theme is most explicit where the authors discuss the case study method, which presents a complicated real-world situation and then asks students “what are you going to do?” in response to that situation. Professors like Minister and Klancher also take the cases one step further by asking students to analyze the ethical significance of their proposed responses. Agency and the empowerment of students is also evident in other areas of this piece as well. For example, the third section of the article highlights how some of the instructors who they interviewed “work[ed] to help [students] self-identify as people capable of contributing to and leading conversations with those who are different from them” through site visits or other forms of engagement with religious practitioners. Although scholarly literature on andragogical or heutagogical principles is not referenced in this work, I can see how the strategies described in this article might cultivate active engagement, application-based knowledge, and a sense of independence, especially in the context of adult education.⁴

As much as ground as Jones and Meyer were able to cover in their descriptive, survey-style article, their work does leave the door open to further development or exploration of certain topics. Personally, I would have appreciated more detailed information about assignments and forms of assessment that instructors in interfaith and interreligious studies are utilizing. While we do gain insight into some of the assignments that students are tasked with completing—such as the spiritual autobiographies and creation of community resources mentioned above—readers do not gain much insight into how instructors are evaluating or scoring those assignments. Does class participation contribute to students’ final grades for the term and, if so, what does exemplary engagement look like in interfaith or interreligious studies classes? Are graded assignments also crafted with an eye toward the applied nature of the field? Do students have any agency in determining how they would like to demonstrate mastery of a given learning outcome? Thus, I would love to see a follow-up article that includes more extensive analysis of learning

⁴ Andragogy is commonly understood as a learner-centered approach to teaching adults that frames learning as a pathway to solving problems or better performing a given task. Andragogy prioritizes experiential learning, the development of self-confidence, and learning that has an immediate relevance or impact in students’ lives. Heutagogy takes up many of the same core priorities of andragogy; however, the learning is more self-directed by the student, who defines their own learning needs and outcomes and is supported in their journey by the instructor. Scholarship on andragogy and, later, heutagogy has become increasingly widespread since the 1970s. See, for example: Malcolm Knowles, *Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984) and Chris Kenyon and Stewart Hase, *Moving from Andragogy to Heutagogy in Vocational Education* (2001): 21–32.

outcomes, sample rubrics, assignment prompts, and more.⁵ I can also imagine opportunities for putting this material into conversation with scholarly literature about authentic assessment.⁶

My other suggested area for further exploration is undoubtedly shaped by the fact that I have taught at multiple institutions that place a high value on social justice work. Namely, I believe it is important to further interrogate the dynamics of power and privilege that appear in both course design and in the classroom. Jones and Meyer end their article with three paragraphs about the possible intersections of interfaith and interreligious studies and other “areas of diversity,” in which they point out that there are different views among instructors on whether or how to discuss topics like race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other topics in relation to religion. Like the authors, I recognize that institutional context can shape or restrict an instructor’s ability to approach religion through an intersectional lens. Ongoing national debates about the alleged teaching of what right-of-center Americans claim is “critical race theory,” to name just one example, are also revealing how politicized and polarizing teaching on these topics has become. However, I would also argue that, if interfaith and interreligious studies is truly a field that is “accountable to community” and centers “relationships at every level,” there is much at stake in how power and privilege are manifest and theorized in these classes. The need for attention to these realities is especially dire given growing critiques that our classrooms—and the academy more generally—are often spheres that reproduce forms of exclusion that are evident in larger society.⁷

Jones and Meyer do help readers see how instructors are thinking through their own social or structural positionality in relation to teaching; however, other questions remain prominent. Are instructors intentionally crafting syllabi that represent authors of diverse racial, ethnic, national, and other backgrounds? What do the racial demographics look like within each of the classes described in this article and how/do those demographics inform pedagogy?⁸ How might instructors set up successful site or classroom visits that do not “other” or tokenize a group? These are but a few of the important questions that might be considered. Follow-up research about dynamics of privilege and power in interfaith and interreligious studies classes would represent a timely and important extension of this article. I also have the suspicion that some of the pedagogies described in this article, such as the use of sources that focus on lived experience, could serve to call attention to or even unsettle oppressive power structures. Ultimately, “Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies” is an article that accomplishes the primary goals of any strong piece of scholarship about teaching and learning: drawing readers into the compelling work that is taking place inside classrooms, foregrounding the tensions and opportunities that inhere in different pedagogical approaches, and inspiring further questions for consideration.

⁵ Here it is also worth noting that there is a collection of interreligious and interfaith studies syllabi available online through the Wabash Center. See: “Syllabi Collection,” The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/syllabi/>.

⁶ See, for example: Kim H. Koh, “Authentic Assessment,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia: Education* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.22>.

⁷ See, for example: Gilda L. Ochoa and Daniela Pineda, “Deconstructing Power, Privilege, and Silence in the Classroom” in *Radical History Review* 102 (Fall 2008): 45–61, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2008-012> and Karen Teel, “Whiteness in Catholic Theological Method,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 2 (June 2019): 401–433, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfz023>.

⁸ I appreciated that the authors noted the number of students enrolled in each course that they observed or studied; however, I would have liked to have seen more detailed analysis of the demographics in these classes. For example, it was helpful to learn that the majority of the students identified as Christians, former Christians, or “nones.”



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