Highlights and a Call for Further Exploration: A Response to Jones and Meyer[1]

Suzanne Watts Henderson

Abstract: This response to "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies" by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer is offered with deep appreciation for the thoughtful care displayed both in the collection of data and in its framing. Their essay effectively conveys the essence not only of my experience teaching a General Education course on spiritual autobiographies but also of the conversations shared at the faculty convening. The response offered here highlights what I deem to be the piece's most noteworthy contributions to the conversation about interfaith and interreligious studies, as well as areas that warrant further exploration.

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In "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies," Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer distill several years' worth of ethnographic research to chronicle the distinctively "applied nature" of courses in the emerging field of interfaith and interreligious studies. Through classroom visits, student focus groups, instructor interviews, and a 2018 convening of professors in the field, the authors have listened well to the objectives, pedagogies, and experiences of nine instructors and their students on eight campuses. The article offers both detailed description and penetrating analysis of seven themes spanning the courses (and one program) they studied. As one whose course was featured in their research and who participated in the 2018 faculty convening, I offer this response with deep appreciation for the thoughtful care displayed both in the collection of data and in its framing. "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies" by Jones and Meyer effectively conveys the essence not only of my experience teaching a General Education course on spiritual autobiographies but also of the conversations shared at the faculty convening. The response offered here highlights what I deem to be the piece's most noteworthy contributions to the conversation about interfaith and interreligious studies, as well as areas that warrant further exploration.

Thematic Windowpanes

Together, the seven themes presented in Jones 'and Meyer's piece provide a helpful window for those seeking deeper understanding about what actually happens in an interfaith or interreligious studies course. As the authors put it, part of their aim is to "bring other instructors metaphorically into the classrooms," and their paper sheds important light on both pedagogical practice and student experience. The themes themselves fall loosely into two groups: pedagogical tools used and learning objectives promoted by faculty. Detailed attention is given to specific activities incorporated in the courses, among them: religious site visits ("experiencing religious diversity"), role playing, case studies (perhaps the field's "signature pedagogy"), and dialogue and deliberation. Readers planning their own courses in the field will appreciate this treasure trove of pedagogical approaches and will be inspired to learn more about such tools as Sid Brown's Careful Conversations or the Barnard site called "Reacting to the Past." Going beyond detailed

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description, each section concludes by noting the implications and further questions raised by the information shared. As a result, the authors engage their audience in nuanced conversation rather than advancing a simplistic or formulaic approach to understanding the field.

Other themes featured in the article have less to do with activities and more to do with learning objectives, both content-based and affective. Professors featured in the piece broadly affirm, for example, the importance of "Interfaith Literacy and Religious Literacy"—or, a certain body of knowledge about religious traditions—even as they tend in the profiled courses to foster that literacy inductively rather than by conventional lecture or textbook reading. In my own experience teaching both a conventional World Religions class and the Spiritual Autobiography course featured here, the value of inductive approaches to religious literacy is crystal clear. Students assigned to represent the views of a religious Zionist in a case study or simulated conversation learn about Jewish ties to Israel in ways that include but move beyond information mastery. Students expected to engage in interpersonal conversation at a Sikh gurdwara have the chance to humanize the "Five Ks" which textbooks present only in theory. Students asked to infer core practices and beliefs of Islam from both *Proud* and *Malcolm X* begin to recognize the dangers of "essentializing" any religious tradition.

In a way, a more inductive approach to religious literacy supports the field's interest in learning outcomes that are practical and affective—outcomes that promote humane instincts beyond the bounds of the classroom. Throughout the article, the authors highlight featured faculty's efforts to convince students (and administrators!) of the" real world" purchase of interreligious understanding and engagement. Historically, the affective impact of courses in the humanities, and especially religious studies, were assumed by many in the academy. With the shift in recent decades toward pre-professional (and revenue rich) curricula, many faculty in this field recognize the importance of more deliberately" Connecting to Professional Skills" in fields ranging from business to health care to church leadership.

This impulse leads to the article's two final themes, which explore students' and instructors' personal religious journey and/or identity. The courses mentioned therein consistently prioritize students' moral formation as citizens in a religiously diverse world, which implicitly necessitates their reflection on core values and sources of inspiration. Some faculty—myself included—opt to model such reflection through transparency about their own beliefs and motivations. Others attempt to avoid self-disclosure, in an effort to avoid the appearance of bias or too much attention to the professor. Still others whose religious identity means they don hijab or kippah have no choice. My own self-disclosure stems from a teaching persona that prioritizes authenticity and relational learning: I find it hard to ask students to approach meaning-making with utter honesty if I do not do so myself. Overall, I find that my approach generally builds rapport with students, as long as I reiterate regularly and deliberately my own inclusive ethic. By acknowledging openly that no one is "objective" in the study of religion, we can begin to grapple together with how our positionality can be both a strength and a liability in interfaith engagement.

The cumulative effect of encountering such detailed reports of these seven themes is to immerse the reader in a variety of interfaith and interreligious studies classrooms in ways that highlight both distinction among the courses and their shared tendencies. The tools used and the

aims advanced by instructors and experienced by students come to light in this paper and provide a window into the interfaith and interreligious studies classroom.

An "Applied Nature"

As something of a "start up" academic field, the landscape of interfaith and interreligious studies features robust, generative conversation on a wide range of issues: What is the relationship between theory and practice? What terminology best captures the discipline? (I have followed the authors in retaining both "interfaith" and "interreligious" modifiers throughout this response.) Where does the field "live" in higher education campuses? What is its relationship to social change? The list goes on.

Rather than wading into lively debates on these and other contested matters, Jones and Meyer begin with "what is"—that is, what is happening in classrooms across the country—in part to answer to "questions about what makes interfaith and interreligious studies a unique field." The themes they detect, then, bring to light not just discrete practices and outcomes but also something larger: the consistently "applied nature of interreligious engagement and understanding."

To be sure, applied knowledge alone does not distinguish interfaith and interreligious studies from other areas of academic study. Programs in business, engineering, health sciences, and other fields increasingly promote pedagogies in which students work together to solve problems, bringing information into practical use to meet each field's core challenges. Indeed, online course design now takes as a given the imperative that content delivery must be followed by "doing something" with the information.

Yet the kinds of application featured in the courses (and one program) Jones and Meyer study goes deeper than the intellectual manipulation of knowledge. Citing Jennifer Howe Peace, they begin their overview by affirming that scholarship in this field is rooted in accountability to "community" and in "the centrality of relationships." This suggests that the "applied nature" of interfaith and interreligious studies means it measures "success" by an ability to engage across religious and worldview difference to strengthen the social fabric of which we are a part.

For many, the field's interest in applied knowledge distinguishes it from conventional religious studies courses, with their heavy emphasis on theorizing religious traditions and worldviews. Yet even before the rise of interfaith/interreligious studies, the lines between theory and practice in the religious studies classroom may not have been as well marked as some assume. To wit: While attending an early faculty seminar on interfaith/interreligious studies, I noted that the learning happening in my "religious studies" courses already exhibited the pedagogies and outcomes articulated in this emerging field. I mentioned to IFYC's founder and president Eboo Patel that it made sense, in my context, simply to "rebrand" religious studies as interfaith studies. He warned against such an approach, perhaps wary that guardians of the conventional, theoretical approach might find this shift troubling. Yet rebrand we did, offering the second Interfaith Studies major in the country. Colleagues across a range of institutions and programs have confirmed my hunch that the "theory/practice" relationship is less binary and more of a continuum than some assume.

Throughout the paper, this "applied nature" surfaces repeatedly. From Matthew Cressler's students' immersion in the "lived religion" context of Atlanta to Kevin Minister's explicit connections to the utility of interfaith and interreligious competencies in the professional world, the featured courses invite students not just to understand and appreciate religious diversity but to navigate religious difference in contexts of community and by means of relationship building. Even more, the "applied nature" of interfaith and interreligious studies extends to questions about personal formation. Rose Aslan's course entitled "Religion, Vocation, and Identity," for instance, employs a role-playing game in ways that engage societal questions within a course designed to promote personal and vocational reflection.

These examples bring us back to a core question about this field: How do its practitioners articulate the ethical framework that undergirds its "applied nature"? As various colleagues have pointed out, this framework in some sense circles back to the origins of religious studies in theological education, except that it neither assumes nor promotes (deliberately, at least) a particular religious tradition. I find myself both sympathetic to this impulse and wary of it: sympathetic because effective professors must "believe in" the innate value of their fields and approaches, but wary about assuming rather than hashing out a shared definition of the "common good."

Context Matters

This leads to another insight that will benefit readers of this article: the overarching observation that, as the writers put it, "institutional context shapes everything: the type of courses instructors teach, how they teach them, their learning outcomes, and where the courses sit in the broader curriculum." This claim stands as a guard against any inclination to "copy/paste" the approaches represented in this paper. Going further, it prompts practitioners to think carefully about their contexts not just for what they preclude (for instance, instructors in some contexts may be advised not to disclose religious commitments to students) but also for the contextual elements that align well with the aims of interfaith and interreligious studies.

In the current higher education climate, it is commonplace to lament the demise of the humanities and the liberal arts in terms of prominence and thus available resources. Yet instructors profiled in this paper consistently take their cues from both campus and societal trends rather than railing against them. Womack's course on Islam in a school of theology arises in part from an awareness, in our post-9/11 world, of harmful religious profiling against Muslims that happens too often from Christian pulpits. Elon's Multifaith Fellows Program facilitated by Amy Allocco fosters student engagement beyond the campus and in the contexts of global as well as community concerns. We learn, too, that the entire department at Shenandoah University has baptized the school's pre-professional degree emphasis by asking how courses such as Minister's will equip students who graduate into business, health care, or other social sectors.

The attention paid by Jones and Meyer to institutional context, then, primes readers to pay attention to aspects of our schools' missions that are well served through the "applied nature" of interreligious and interfaith studies. Whether it is through institutional learning outcomes that prioritize "global citizenship" or promote "diversity, equity, and inclusion," or more pragmatic

concerns such as retention data, courses in this field are poised to help students connect with one another, with their wider world, and even with their own social and emotional landscape in ways that meet the needs of the landscape of higher education. Perhaps ironically, in a context of diminishing interest in religious studies as an academic field, the case for interfaith and interreligious studies can be a compelling one to administrators as well as faculty and staff colleagues across the board. How then might we frame the field of interfaith and interreligious studies as a discipline that leverages research and learning to serve the emerging exigencies of higher education in service to our contemporary world?

Interdisciplinarity

This observation leads to another important question that arises out of Jones' and Meyer's study. By design, the researchers focused exclusively on courses anchored in religious studies departments. This constraint stemmed from the grant design but makes good sense on many levels. Most pioneers in the field of interreligious and interfaith studies are trained in religion or religious studies. In many cases—Minister's and my own institutional settings are great examples—religious studies programs have evolved in ways that prioritize the kind of "applied learning" foregrounded in this field and thus have veered toward interfaith or interreligious studies in place of religious studies, conventionally understood. Even departments that remain deeply committed to theorizing religion for the purpose of critical inquiry (such as Elon, featured in this piece) have engaged interreligious studies as a subdiscipline, often hosting minors or programs such as Elon's Multifaith Fellowship.

Yet, as many have claimed, the cross-disciplinary nature of interfaith/interreligious studies is as inherent as its "applied nature." Not only does the field deploy research strategies honed in humanities departments such as English and history, as well as social science offices from sociology to anthropology, but it also contributes meaningfully to both classroom and research in these areas. In a sense, interfaith and interreligious studies courses only make more explicit the vital relevance of understanding and navigating religious difference in a wide variety of fields.

Only one course in this study—Wakoh Shannon Hickey's and Hannah Murphy Buc's "Caregiving at the End of Life"—was truly interdisciplinary. Co-taught by a Buddhist scholar and practitioner and a nursing professor, the course aims to equip students to engage religiously diverse patients in end-of-life settings. But while there are institutional obstacles to such "team-taught" courses, theirs emerges as a model that will likely inspire readers to find partners across disciplines who share an interest in attending to religious diversity fruitfully.

This impulse raises important questions for faculty teaching in interfaith and interreligious studies. Since most of us are trained in the study of religion and thus accustomed to navigating religious difference, how might we engage our colleagues outside the field to do so? Besides team-teaching, in which we can lead the way through course design and pedagogy, are there strategies to engage and equip faculty across disciplines whose courses might benefit from incorporating religious diversity? How might we think creatively about funding for faculty training in this area that builds community even as it infuses a wide range of courses with interfaith and interreligious competencies?

Centrality of Relationships

Ultimately, as Peace and others have noted, the field of interfaith and interreligious studies is relational "at every level." True, many (including Brian Pennington) have warned against prioritizing relational harmony at the expense of robust theoretical and social critique. Indeed, Pennington's course nudges students to move, as its title suggests, "Beyond Conflict and Tolerance" to understand meaningful "Interreligious Encounters and Social Change." Interreligious engagement remains superficial when it entails either outright hostility or "agreeing to disagree." Authentic human discourse across difference—including and especially religious difference—entails a willingness to problematize and complicate our religious identities, commitments, and interactions.

After all, social science research on "social capital" has convinced many that, without forging authentic, even messy, relationships across difference, we remain captives in our siloed communities, more committed to being right than to deep listening. The polarized world that we inhabit is a direct result, it turns out, of diversity that is untended.

Courses such as those featured here can equip the next generation of teachers and bankers and health care workers and civic leaders to seek out and cultivate relationships with those outside our circles, however we draw them. What is more, they do so in ways that dare explore questions of ultimate meaning, core values, and practices designed to help us be our best version of human beings. How then might we model for our students the kinds of relationships—with colleagues, community members, and others—that are brave enough to feature both vulnerability and complexity, both conviction and curiosity, both critique and humility?

I remain deeply grateful to Jones and Meyer for the chance to be part of this study. Their inquiry has sharpened my own as I constantly review and revise my pedagogical aims, strategies, and motivating inspiration. This paper provides a resource for those who are curious about the emerging field, as well as for those who are steeped in it and committed to making it more effective, responsible, and rewarding for all.

Suzanne Watts Henderson is Professor of Religion and Dean of the Belk Chapel at Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina. She also serves as Senior Consultant, Strategic Initiatives, for Interfaith America.

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