

## Contributions Toward Defining Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: A Response to Jones and Meyer<sup>1</sup>

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*This essay demonstrates how “Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment” by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer represents a significant step in the development of Interreligious/Interfaith Studies—particularly, how it contributes an answer to the question of “What is Interreligious/Interfaith Studies?”—an issue that is of interest to the audience of this journal, as well as to those involved in Religious Studies, senior higher education leadership, and funding agencies and foundations.*

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“Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment” by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer represents a significant step in the development of Interreligious/Interfaith Studies, especially in giving us an “insider” view of the various classes taught on the topic. While other works have focused on theory and expressions of faith (such as autobiographies, memoirs, or stories related to interfaith engagement in the United States context), the article provides a window into how Interreligious/Interfaith Studies is taught throughout the country by a variety of instructors in different institutional contexts. Their work in traveling to see the courses taught and engaging the array of instructors is remarkable and is a unique contribution to the nascent field. The article is further distinct because each section ends with a series of questions and points of reflection that demonstrate that the work is not the final say on Interreligious/Interfaith Studies, but rather, one that will prompt more thought and scholarship. In what follows, I will focus on how the article contributes an answer to the question of “What is Interreligious/Interfaith Studies?”—as the issue is of interest to the audience of this journal, as well as to those involved in Religious Studies, senior higher education leadership, and funding agencies and foundations.

First, the article demonstrates that Interreligious/Interfaith Studies is developing a coherent body of literature and practitioners who define the field. For instance, *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, edited by Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, is cited throughout the article and many of the contributors to the volume—such as Amy Allocco, Kevin Minister, Brian Pennington, Deanna Ferree Womack—are profiled. Moreover, one of the central questions of the piece is the connection between theory and practice—or, as Jennifer Howe Peace has argued: “...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> In their conclusion, Jones and Meyers draw on Jeanine Hill Fletcher’s article, “The Promising Practice of Antiracist Approaches to Interfaith Studies,” to contend that more work needs to be done on

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

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

race in the interreligious/interfaith space.<sup>3</sup> The field is now building upon existing literature which produces a shared framework and intellectual foundation.

Second, a consistent theme for Jones and Meyer is the making of religious knowledge “practical” and transferable to the job market. The various instructors are not content simply with teaching about religious traditions; rather, they want to teach “how to interact with the complex people and communities who make up those traditions.” Jones and Meyer draw on Ellie Pierce’s “Using the Case Studies Method in Interfaith Studies Classrooms,” which advocates for interreligious and multifaith case studies that ask “What are you going to do about this?” rather than focusing on rote knowledge. Instead of administering exams which test students’ knowledge of the religious traditions, students are confronted with case studies where they have “to reconcile multiple perspectives and to come up with a solution.”<sup>4</sup> Rose Aslan, for instance, has her students deal with the Park51 controversy and reconcile questions of religious freedom, Islamophobia, and public concern. Similarly, Deanna Womack asks students to write something that they would publish in a church newsletter rather than just writing something for the Professor or the class. Nancy Klancher’s pedagogy firmly focuses on deliberative processes where students must collaboratively reach a democratic solution to interreligious challenges through case studies. She repeatedly asks students, “What are *you* going to do?” rather than just simply “what do you know?”

Moreover, certain institutions, like Shenandoah University, do not hide their commitment to “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.” Kevin Minister from Shenandoah explains how he engages with students who are trying to figure out how the university’s general education requirements and Religious Studies courses fit within their professional goals. He notes that “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>5</sup> One of Minister’s current signature courses “Navigating Religious Diversity” shuns the World Religions model and, rather, asks how we can communicate successfully in a religiously diverse world. Nonetheless, Jones and Meyer are aware that such a practical and career-minded approach may alienate Religious Studies faculty who may be wary of a business approach to the University. As they state in one of their reflection questions, “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’?” The larger humanities faculty may be skeptical of moves towards making their scholarship and teaching more amenable to those in the Business school or the sciences.

Personally, I am of two minds on this issue. On one hand, I like how religious studies and interreligious studies are becoming more practical and applied. Most students are coming to college to get a job and want the institution and professor to help them toward that goal. On the other hand, I don’t want to limit my teaching to only what is relevant to the “market” or to

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<sup>3</sup> Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “The Promising Practice of Antiracist Approaches to Interfaith Studies,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies*, 137–46.

<sup>4</sup> Ellie Pierce, “Using the Case Studies Method in Interfaith Studies Classrooms,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies*, 72–84.

<sup>5</sup> Jones and Myer, 26.

“careers”. I do believe in the “humanities” or “great books” approach where students benefit from engagement with “classics” which enhance their being, worldview, and quality of life.

Third, the instructors in this study are not content with teaching only *about* religion; they want their students to interact with those from living religious communities. For instance, we see Matthew Cressler take his class to visit two Hindu communities and then have their students compare between the two experiences. The exercise led to a fascinating discussion of race and religion and how one experience appeared more “authentic” than the other. Deanna Womack similarly noted that “‘knowing’ about Islam doesn’t mean that you know how to love your Muslim neighbor.” After reading about the Nation of Islam, students expressed how the community appeared patriarchal and represented certain conservative factions within their own religious communities. However, this did not prevent her from inviting a former member of the Nation of Islam to the class and who was profiled in course readings. Religious literacy was not an end goal in itself but connected to being able to engage with those who practice such religions.

The article ends by pointing to important directions in the development of the field, such as the focus on race. Jones and Meyers note that “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”. Future studies could profile faculty of color who teach Interreligious/Interfaith Studies and how their experiences are similar and different than white faculty members. Does their racial identity change what readings they assign or what topics emerge in class? How does the national climate affect their pedagogy and how they approach their subject material? How do they personally deal with being a minority and teaching in white-majority institutions? On the flip side, it would be interesting to profile a faculty member who teaches Interreligious/Interfaith Studies at a Historical Black College and University. How does a black majority context change the discussion and framework?

Similarly, it would be nice to profile an international faculty member who is either a foreign national or a naturalized American citizen. How has their international experience influenced their teaching and view of the field? What insights do they have as a “non-American” and how Interreligious studies/Interfaith Studies is enacted in the United States? What experiences do they have as somebody who may be perceived as “foreign” through an accent or different skin complexion? In a related way, it would be helpful to profile a faculty member at an international university who teaches Interreligious/Interfaith studies. Do those teaching outside the United States draw on the same body of literature in North America or do they have their own course material and intellectual tradition? How do their unique contexts influence how they teach and the topics they raise?

Future work should also explore how Interfaith/Interreligious Studies is contributing, not only in the classroom, but to the larger campus community. With the Great Recession and the COVID-19 crisis, universities are facing budget deficits, and many are unfortunately not hiring faculty in Religious Studies and the humanities in general. Moreover, enrollments in Religious Studies courses have dropped as students are increasingly career-driven and worried about how each course is connected to their future profession and academic degree. However, this has not prevented Interfaith/Interreligious Studies faculty from being creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial in their efforts to spread their pedagogy and knowledge across campus. For

instance, we hear briefly about Amy Allocco's Multifaith Scholars Program, which has "a three prongs: academic coursework, faculty-mentored undergraduate research, and community engagements." It would be fascinating to hear more about how the program is structured, how it intersects with various aspects of the campus community and how it engages students. Could such a program be replicated at other universities as a way to attract new students to Interfaith/Interreligious Studies? Moreover, Kevin Minister runs Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) workshops at Shenandoah University where he trains faculty and students on how to engage in dialogue in a meaningful and constructive way. Minister has taken many of the principles of his course "Navigating Religious Difference" and made them accessible to the larger campus community.

Those not profiled in this article but still making Interfaith/Interreligious Studies accessible throughout their communities are Hans Gustafson and Jacqueline Bussie. Gustafson runs the Jay Phillips Center for Interreligious Studies at the University of St. Thomas which includes "Interreligious Studies" as part of its name. It is further clear that Interfaith/Interreligious Studies informs the Center's mission which is "dedicated to a scholar-practitioner approach to cultivating interfaith leadership that promotes basic (inter)religious literacy through lived encounter with people, communities and ideas, and provides opportunities to wrestle constructively with our growing religious diversity."<sup>6</sup> The Center seeks to expose its students to religious diversity while also engaging in critical and civic approaches. Similarly, Jacqueline Bussie was the founding director of Concordia College's Forum on Faith & Life which "creates exciting local and global opportunities for genuine encounters and transformative conversations with the interfaith and intrafaith neighbor." It is evident that these various centers draw on Interfaith/Interreligious Studies in their structure and programming.

At my institution, as Director of Global Virtual Learning, I regularly use Interfaith/Interreligious Studies as a way to think about and to design the exchanges. I have increasingly been drawn to virtual exchange and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as a way to enact Interfaith/Interreligious Studies, especially with the advent of the pandemic and growth of online learning. Through COIL, students implement key principles of Interfaith/Interreligious Studies such as engaging living religious communities and learning practical and professional skills. For instance, through video conferencing and group text, students interact with those from radically different contexts than their own and engage in meaningful dialogue and discussion and cooperative problem-solving. Instead of simply learning about religion and religious communities, students collaborate with their peers who are both similar and different than themselves. Moreover, COIL teaches students skills of effective digital communication and working on global teams which is easily transferable to different careers and professions.

In conclusion, Jones and Meyer have contributed significantly to our understanding of Interreligious/Interfaith Studies by profiling various faculty members throughout the country on their pedagogy and teaching. They help us understand what Interreligious/Interfaith studies looks like "on the ground" and in the "classroom" and compare the different styles and approaches. Future research could expand those profiled and examine centers and programs

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Gustafson, "About the Jay Phillips Center," University of St. Thomas, January 28, 2022, <https://cas.stthomas.edu/centers-institutes/center-for-interreligious-studies/>

which incorporate Interfaith/Interreligious Studies. Jones and Meyer should be commended for sparking these important discussions and their work will become a well-referenced article in the growing field.



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