

Towards a New Program for Interfaith Learning: Reflections from an Interreligious Educator Working in the Netherlands

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Over the years, I have developed a pedagogical approach to interfaith learning, which focuses on interpersonal learning and revolves around the exchanges of life stories. The focal point of this pedagogy is not so much increase of knowledge about different traditions, but rather lived religion—that is, beliefs, practices, and everyday experiences of people of different faiths. Learning with and from others, students acquire appreciative knowledge about different faith traditions and learn to recognize and de-essentialize difference while gaining the skills to construct relationships with people who believe and practice differently. However, my work as an interfaith scholar and educator has also revealed to me some of the limitations of this approach to interfaith learning and the need to complement the focus on interpersonal exchange with a more structural approach that challenges and unsettles normative thinking. In this essay, I argue that an exchange of difference ought to go hand in hand with a critical exploration of normativity and how institutionalized claims to normativity translate in an unequal distribution of social power.

Keywords: critical theory, critical pedagogy, interfaith education, power, dialogue

For over a decade, I have been working at a multifaith faculty of Religion and Theology, in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, where I teach religiously mixed classrooms, coordinate a master's program in *Interreligious Studies*, and organize interfaith leadership programs. This context immediately positions my work in a highly secularized (North-Western) European country with a strong Christian heritage. My students are Jewish (3), Muslim (5), Buddhist (3), Hindu (1), Bahá'í (2), anthroposophist (1), Christian (7), spiritual but not religious (3) and atheist (4). Furthermore, some of the non-Christians are “converts” of white Dutch descent.¹ They were raised Christian or secular and became Buddhist, Muslim, Bahá'í or Jewish as adolescents or adults.² I give the numbers between parentheses, not because these are fixed numbers, but because they do give a sense of the majority-minority dynamics in classroom. While it is true that my classroom is religiously mixed, it is equally true that the majority has a White Christian or Christo-secular background. This situation reflects the norm in Dutch society, where (white) Dutch Christian or Christo-seculars occupy the dominant position in society and enjoy the controlling power.³

¹ The notion of conversion is used by Christians, but only rarely by Jews and Muslims. They rather speak about becoming Muslim or becoming Jewish. Bat Sheva Hass, “Being a ‘White Muslima’ in the Netherlands : Ethnicity, friendships and relationships—The Dutch conversion narrative,” *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11070345>. See also Nella van den Brandt, “Negotiating Transformation and Difference: Women’s Stories of Conversion to Judaism and Islam,” in *Transforming Bodies and Religions Powers and Agencies in Europe*, ed. Mariecke van den Berg et al. (London: Routledge, 2020); van den Brandt, “Negotiating Transformation and Difference: Women’s Stories of Conversion to Judaism and Islam.” I did not consult literature on Buddhist converts.
² For a recent study of Dutch women converting to Islam, Judaism and Christianity, see Lieke Schrijvers, “Questioning the Conversion Paradox: Gender, Sexuality, and Belonging amongst Women Becoming Jewish, Christian, and Muslim in the Netherlands” (PhD University of Utrecht and University of Ghent, 2022). Schrijvers notices, in line with this article, that the stereotypes with which these women are confronted the most are “that religion is outdated; that choosing religion is a sign of limited intelligence; and that women who convert lack freedom.” (241)

³ In the Netherlands too, religious difference intersects with racialized difference. This intersection has been called the religio-racial nexus Anya Topolski, “The dangerous discourse of the ‘Judaean-Christian’ myth : Masking the race-religion constellation in Europe,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 1 (2020). Usually, though not always (cf. the discussion

Difference, in this case religious difference, is marked and salient because it deviates from this norm.⁴ This norm shows itself in that *difference as deviation from the norm* is named explicitly: people will say *they have* a Muslim friend, a Jewish mayor, or a Buddhist partner. The *others* in my classroom are non-Christian or non-secular. It is via the shadow of deviation that the unmarked norm shows itself.

However, there are gradations of otherness. Christians who are *too religious*—that is, too conservative, too attached to the Bible and ecclesial hierarchies (e.g. those who live in the Bible belt)⁵—fall outside the norm; Jews, especially in *public discourse* tend to be included in a “Judeo-Christian” story line about human rights, tolerance and progress; Buddhists tend to be associated with mindfulness; the Baha’i’s are fairly unknown.⁶ In public discourse, Muslims, however, are often framed as non-Dutch and truly other. They tend to be projected as embracing a lifestyle that is contrary to and irreconcilable with the “Judeo-Christian” values central to the Netherlands. Islam is often projected as a *problematic religion* and Muslims are often confronted with suspicion.⁷

about blood purity), racialized difference is fixated on the color of skin. If one sees a white Dutch person, people will assume s/he is Christian or secular. If Christians in a European setting tend to be perceived as *white*, Islam is projected as a non-white religion. This also affects “white converts to Islam,” who experience loss of white privilege, without however encountering the same racism as people of color. Hass, “Being a ‘White Muslima’ in the Netherlands.” Jews in a Dutch context pass as white and enjoy white privilege, even though they do not necessarily self-identify as white, which is about much more than the color of skin. As Gideon Querido van Frank, himself Jewish explains, “My skin may not be dark, but white and black are more than colors. White is the norm, the majority devoid of a sense of personal pain passed down from generation to generation. White can run away from the past, wave away the deeds of its ancestors, and cry that the eternal guilt is finished. I cannot distance myself from this, because I live with the consequences of that past embedded in my DNA. Jews have never been white, never the norm, never the majority with ‘weapons and borders responsible for poverty, violence and exploitation.’ For most of history, we have been excluded, persecuted and exterminated as an ethnic minority, and there is damn little white about that.” Gideon Querido van Frank, “Are Jews White?,” (2020). <https://jck.nl/en/node/4672>.

⁴ Religious involvement in the Netherlands continued to decline between 2017 and 2019. In 2017, for the first time, slightly less than half (49 percent) of Dutch people aged 15 years or older considered themselves to belong to a religious denomination or ideological group, in 2019 this was 46 percent. Catholics make up the largest group with 20 percent of the population, followed by Protestants (15 percent) and Muslims (5 percent). Nearly 6 percent belong to a different denomination. The proportion who regularly attend religious services has also shrunk from 16 percent in 2017 to 14 percent in 2019. Opinions are divided about the existence of God. One in three say they don't believe in God, while a quarter do. The rest do not know whether God exists, doubt about this or believe in a higher power.” [My translation]. “Religie in Nederland,” 2020, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2020/religie-in-nederland#:~:text=De%20katholieken%20vormen%20de%20grootste,naar%2014%20procent%20in%202019.>

⁵ Bible Belt is “a popular label for the geographical concentration of the orthodox wing of Protestantism in the Netherlands.” In the Dutch Bible Belt, which covers a region extending from the South of the country to Yselmeer, live approximately 500 000 people. The overall population of the Netherlands is 17 million. Anneke Pons-de Wit et al., “Buildings and Bibles Between Profanization and Sacralization: Semiotic Ambivalence in the Protestant Dutch Bible Belt,” *Material Religion* 15, no. 1 (01/01 2019): 2.

⁶ For a critique of the notion “Judeo-Christian,” see Marianne Moyaert, “Christianizing Judaism: On the Problem of Christian Seder Meals,” in *Is there a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective*, eds. Anya Topolski and Emmanuel Nathan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 137–163. Interesting too is Anya Topolski, “A Genealogy of the ‘Judeo-Christian’ Signifier: A Tale of Europe’s Identity Crisis,” in the same volume.

⁷ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of colonialism and race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 55.

A Narrative Approach to Interfaith Learning

Over the years, I have developed a pedagogical approach to interfaith learning, which focuses on interpersonal learning and revolves around the exchanges of life stories. The focal point of this pedagogy is not so much increase of knowledge about different traditions, but rather lived religion—that is, beliefs, practices, and everyday experiences of people of different faiths. The pertinent questions are: what do you believe? what do you value? how do you see the world around you? what is your experience in any given situation? what traditions (familial, religious, cultural, societal) do you cherish? how do you give meaning to your life? what resources do you draw upon? how does that compare to others and how does that affect your relation to others? Theoretically, this focus on the sharing of personal stories matches with a narrative approach to personal identity. Dialogue, from this perspective, is not simply a pedagogical approach, but is *in sync* with a hermeneutical anthropology: considering that our own life story is always interwoven with the stories of others and we only come to understand ourselves via the detour of the stories of others it makes sense to say that the storied self is dialogical.⁸ Moving beyond accounts of identity that trap us in a polarity between sameness or otherness, students learn to recognize both difference and overlap between themselves and those of other faiths and learn to appreciate both *interreligious* plurality as well as *intrareligious* plurality. This narrative approach stirs the imagination, enables students to change perspective and to picture what the world might look like from another vantage point. The fragile space in-between, where stories are exchanged, has the potential not only of producing new knowledge but also of creating a sense of interconnectedness. Elsewhere, I called this approach to interfaith learning a form of narrative hospitality.⁹

The narrative approach to interfaith learning emphasizes how each person in the classroom is different in some way—since each student has his or her own religious biography. Next, it acknowledges that as embodied and embedded creatures, all human persons are somehow prejudiced, which is why raising self-awareness and engaging in critical self-reflection is so important. Finally, it also assumes that dialogue takes place in a safe space where students engage with one another in reciprocity and co-create more nuanced knowledge. Learning *with* and *from* others, students acquire appreciative knowledge about different faith traditions and learn to recognize and de-essentialize difference while gaining the skills to construct relationships with people who believe and practice differently.¹⁰ To this day, this narrative approach to interfaith learning occupies a central place in my education, for all of the reasons mentioned above. However, my work as an interfaith scholar and educator has also revealed to me some of the limitations of this approach to interfaith learning and the need to complement the focus on interpersonal exchange with a more structural approach that challenges and unsettles normative thinking.¹¹ An exchange of difference ought to go hand in hand with a critical exploration of normativity and how institutionalized claims to normativity translate in an unequal distribution of social power.

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁹ Marianne Moyaert, "Biblical, ethical and hermeneutical reflections on narrative hospitality," in *Hosting the stranger : between religions*, ed. Richard Kearney and James Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2011).

¹⁰ Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: a primer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

¹¹ Halleh Ghorashi, "Inclusivity Means Breaking the 'Otherness' Fixation," *European Green Journal* (2019). <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/inclusivity-means-breaking-the-otherness-fixation/>.

Interfaith Learning, Frames, and Identity as Social Constructs

Moving away from a fixation on *formal traditions* and trying to avoid essentialization, the narrative approach understands religious difference, first and foremost, in terms of personal beliefs and practices. (This may be compared to the idea of religious biography.) Together students explore each other's perspectives and learn to better understand, appreciate, or simply respect different takes on life. This pedagogy of togetherness and co-production of knowledge, however, overlooks the fact that religious identity is also a social identity (like gender, race, class) that impacts a person's positionality within society.¹² Certainly, it is true that people give meaning and sense to their own identity (who one is and what one does and believes and why). Nevertheless, it is also true that, to be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or otherwise is not simply a personal journey of meaning-making; rather, religious identities are also socially constructed in an historico-cultural context marked by unequal power relations.

Indeed, based on the reflective journals of my Christo-secular students, I know that many of them spontaneously associate statues of Hindu gods with either idolatry or immature/premodern religion, just like most tend to conceive of Buddhism as a worldview aligning with modern values of Enlightenment and tolerance. If Buddhism is framed in terms of peacefulness, Islam finds itself on the other end of the spectrum. Many students admit that when they see a *niqab*, they think of oppression, traditionalism and non-European religion, and so forth. Before we get to know someone *personally* and before we learn more about what his/her traditions *mean* to him/her and how s/he makes sense of the world as a person of (no) faith, we already (think to) know so much and we already are tapped within the (common) knowledge that circulates in our society about the particular social group to which we assume this person belongs. What we know, therefore, is not only one-sided (hence the importance of critical self-reflection), our knowledge (what we know) also reflects the values and interests of those who produced it in the first place (for example, the idea that the Netherlands is rooted in the "Judeo-Christian" value system, or the image of Islam as a political religion, or the equation of secular and neutral/objective). In critical theory, we also speak about the way knowledge is framed. Frames help to filter and organize facts, and "facts take on meaning by being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame".¹³ Frames provide references for people about what is important and what is not important, what is useful and what is not, what requires our attention and what does not. Thus, they help to organize knowledge by means of shifting, categorizing, and classifying and they also impact the way we engage the issue at hand.¹⁴ Significantly, these

¹² Sachi Edwards, "Distinguishing between Belief and Culture: A Critical Perspective on Religious Identity," *Journal of College and Character* 19, no. 3 (2018); Sachi Edwards, "Critical Reflections on the Interfaith Movement: A Social Justice Perspective," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 11, no. 2 (2018). See also Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian privilege: The illusion of religious equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 1 online resource (277 pages); Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "For whom, and to what end? Possibilities and implications of privileging intersectionality in interreligious studies," in *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, ed. Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022).

¹³ William A. Gamson, *Talking politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ In the highly individualized society where I teach, The Netherlands, my students, find this quite difficult to relate to. They see themselves as unique and original thinkers who are quite capable of making up their own mind. They have an opinion about everything and little awareness about *how they tend to think alike* and how what they think (and how they think about their own thought process) is already shaped and co-formed by the dominant frames of knowledge in Dutch society.

frames mirror some of the values, interests, and concerns of those who produced it in the first place.¹⁵ Hence, the importance of exploring critical questions, such as: which frames are operative when dealing with religion? in which socio-political context did they emerge? to the benefit (and detriment) of whom?

The Postsecular Frame and the Two Faces of Religion

When dealing with the issue of religion and religious diversity in a European, Dutch context, one of the dominant frames is that of the *Great Separation*, according to which the religio-secular divide saved the “political domain from the clutches of religious fanaticism.”¹⁶ Since 9/11, this secular frame of the Great Separation has been both reaffirmed and challenged by the frame of the so-called post-secular turn, which focuses on the *comeback of the problem of religion*. Indeed, the general thrust is, first, that religion has made a comeback as a problem and as a security issue. If, within the secular frame, religion had tended to be projected primarily as a remnant from the past, now the sense is, that mainly because of migration (read: the problem is imported from elsewhere) religion as a problem (a problem from the past that Europe had outgrown) is back (with Islam as the symbolic carrier of problematic religion). This frame is further nuanced by the distinction between the two faces of religion: good and bad religion.¹⁷

Underpinning the face of good religion are various liberal assumptions about what religion is and *should be* and what its *proper* place is in society. Good religion is reasonable; it does not cling to the material (visible, palpable, smellable, ...), ritual, or legal dimensions of religion; it accepts critique and strives after detachment from religious externalities. Good religion does not need frills or outer show and views all those ritual, material, and spatial externalities as historically-culturally determined and thus relative.¹⁸ It knows that it cannot lose itself in this kind of detail but must focus on what is ultimately important; it cannot be captured in human images. The emphasis is put “on interiority, personal faith and sincerity of the beliefs ends with an idea of religiosity as a completely existential experience.”¹⁹ Authentic religiosity or mature faith is spiritual, apolitical, and personal rather than ritual, material, political and traditional.²⁰ These liberal assumptions intersect with the imaginary of Protestantism as the cradle of Enlightened tolerance and the religio-secular divide as the guarantee of civic peace in plural societies.

This interiorized understanding of good religion goes together with the construction of bad religion. Within the post-secular frame, bad religion is dangerous, political, extremist, fundamentalist, too orthodox, not enlightened, not emancipated, too attached to (a literal reading) of scripture, too observant when it comes to ritual practice, too conservative when it comes religious law, and so forth. In Europe, especially Muslim communities have been cast as

¹⁵ Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is everyone really equal? : An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*, Second ed., Multicultural education series, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Robert A. Yelle, "‘Moses’ veil: secularization as Christian myth’," in *After Secular Law*, ed. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert A. Yelle, and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo (Stanford: Stanford Law Books 2011), 24.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond religious freedom : the new global politics of religion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017), 100.

¹⁸ Marianne Moyaert, "Critical Religious education and the deconstruction of religion," in *Inter-Worldview Competences in Worldview Education*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Peeters, 2022).

¹⁹ Massimo Rosati, *Ritual and the Sacred A Neo-Durkheimian Analysis of Politics, Religion and the Self* (Routledge, 2016), 27.

²⁰ Marianne Moyaert, "Inter-worldview education and the re-production of good religion," *Education Sciences* 8, no. 4 (2018).

(potentially) dangerous and in need of constant surveillance. While it is seen as the utmost importance to discern between good and bad Muslims, since 9/11, Muslims are overall being mistrusted.²¹ Importantly, however, the negative stereotypes that circulate about Muslims are not new at all, but rather reiterate age-old pejorative images that have accumulated for centuries long and that are now being put to use in new context. The reproachment of Islam, furthermore, also justifies policies that are intent on containing, domesticating, and even eradicating bad religion.²²

Starting from these two faces of faith, policy measures are put in place to restore benevolent forms religion and to counteract dangerous expressions of faith.²³ Those who claim to adhere to a form of good religion are expected to seek to combat and/or reform bad religion. There is a sense in which the so-called dialogical turn in education is at least to a certain extent part of the so-called securitization of religion and the pedagogization of Islam and is aimed at the promotion of liberal religion after 9/11.²⁴

Distinguishing between Religious Normalcy and Deviation and the Establishment of Religious Stratification

Within this (post)secular frame, good—that is, personal, spiritual, apolitical—religion is projected as *normal religion*.²⁵ It is the standard against which varying expressions of religiosity are measured. It is the ideal projected onto society: this is how *we* do things here and how *we* want others to do things; this is what *we* consider “normal” religious behavior, this what *we* regard as strange, and this is where *we* draw the line and where vigilance or even an intervention might be needed. The effort to instill a sense of religious normativity together with the discrediting of religious deviance. Good religion is contrasted to bad religion, and bad religion is projected onto society’s *others*. An us/them binary prevails. Because *they* do not meet the standard projected by society, *they* are seen as outsiders; perhaps *they* are even a danger to the norms and values of society.

When, on the other hand, people are “successfully” socialized into society vis-à-vis religion, they internalize society’s norms and embrace them as their own and they are taken for granted: this is how things in essence *are and should be, this is how we do things, this is how normal people should give expression to their faith*. People learn how to perform their religion appropriately, how to

²¹ Marianne Moyaert, *Patterns of Religionization: a History of Selfing and Othering*, (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, under review).

²² To give but one example, from my own context, recently, it became public knowledge in the Netherlands, that several Dutch municipalities have been secretly probing mosques, mosque association affiliates and imams, using private companies.

²³ Hurd, *Beyond religious freedom : the new global politics of religion*; Nadia Fadil, Francesco Ragazzi, and Martijn de Koning, *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands : Critical perspectives on violence and security* (London, UK ;: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 1 online resource (1 volume) : illustrations (black and white).

²⁴ By “pedagogization of Islam” is meant the push to approach “Islam” in a certain way—for example, either by teaching about so-called “good Islam” or by preparing professionals for the potential of “bad Islam”. Liam Gearon, “Education, Security and Intelligence Studies,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 63, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2015.1079363>; Mette Buchardt, “When ‘Muslim-ness’ is pedagogised. ‘Religion’ and ‘culture’ as knowledge and social classification in the classroom,” *British Journal of Religious Education* 32, no. 3 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2010.498614>. Kathleen Foody, “Pedagogical Projects: Teaching Liberal Religion After 9/11,” *The Muslim World* 106, no. 4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12167>.

²⁵ I will follow the line of research developed in “Critical Religion”—“which is shorthand for the critical historical deconstruction of “religion” and related categories” (Fitzgerald 2015, 304). The question to what extent it is appropriate to use this terminology, will be addressed from this scholarly perspective.

bring this up in conversations, how to express it in their clothing, and how to fittingly deal with religious difference. Clearly, religion is never only about belief, it is a performed identity and an acquired habitus. Simultaneously, people also learn how not to be religious, and they acquire a sense of what *abnormal religion* is—that is, what deviates from the norm. Following various processes of socialization, via upbringing, education, media, and policymaking, most individuals almost instinctively and associatively learn to discriminate between people based on the distinction between religious normality and religious deviance.

When the disadvantages and “benefits of adhering to one religious tradition ... [are] incorporated in the social fabric of society,” religious inequality becomes a real problem.²⁶ This is what we call religious stratification. To this day, religious stratification continues to be a significant form of social hierarchy. This is the case in diverse societies, where often the norm of a historico-cultural powerful majority is institutionalized and thus continues to hold power over religious minorities. However, even in societies that are less diverse, and where by and large only one tradition prevails, hierarchical classification occurs. Conformity to normativity, in this case religious normativity, translates into privilege, whereas deviation from the norm may lead to marginalization.²⁷ Especially, when people who belong to a deviant religious tradition are imagined as less qualified or even potentially problematic (cf. deficit theory), they may experience all sorts of (unjust) obstacles to realizing their life goals and ambitions. There might be laws that make religious discrimination legal (for example, what occupation you may practice; or whom you may marry; or where you may worship, what clothes you may wear in public office or in school, and so on), but it may also be that religious stratification is structurally institutionalized (e.g., that only leaders of officially recognized religious communities receive remuneration or that only officially recognized religion receive airtime on public Radio and Television, both of which are the case in several European countries).

The idea that religious stratification does not occur in societies that have laws in place forbidding religious discrimination is simply wrong, it is a statement similar to saying that we live in a post-racial society. At the very least, those who deviate from the norm will often find themselves placed in the position of having to explain themselves and their behavior, or even to defend themselves over against what is perceived to be the norm, and if they want their perspective to be heard, they still must relate to the norm, thereby at once reiterating and reproducing it. Because religious minorities do not have the same access to institutional power, it is furthermore difficult to challenge the dominant worldview and change their societal position.

Significantly, deeply ingrained negative prejudicial stereotypes about religious minorities, which deviate from the norm, tend to lead to a lowering of the credibility status of their voices.²⁸ Because they belong to a religious group about which society harbors certain negative prejudices, what they have to say *to defend themselves* simply is not taken seriously. This form of testimonial injustice further limits religious minorities’ capacity to impact society’s consensus about religious normativity and transform any extant negative stereotypes about their traditions. Being pushed

²⁶ Ralph E. Pyle and James D. Davidson, "The Origins of Religious Stratification in Colonial America," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2003): 58.

²⁷ A Sophie Lauwers, "Religion, secularity, culture? Investigating Christian privilege in Western Europe," *Ethnicities* 0, no. 0 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968221106185>

²⁸ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic injustice : Power and the ethics of knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

to the defense, it is quite hard for them to critically challenge the normative framework.²⁹ Developing a counter-narrative and communicating what the world looks like from a subaltern perspective is often an uphill battle.

Interfaith Learning and the Problem of Othering

While interfaith dialogue might be projected as a space of reciprocity, co-formation, and co-creation—that is, as a place where, through sharing, personal narrative knowledge is co-produced—this space can also be experienced by those who deviate from the norm as a space of othering, where their identity is problematized or exoticized and where their voice and what they have to contribute simply are not heard. Based on my own experience as an interfaith educator, there are various responses possible to this situation and those whose religious identities deviate from the norm seem to cope with this situation in different ways.³⁰

Some reject the very idea that their *religious* identity does not fit the normative framework of liberal, tolerant, and progressive Dutch ideals. In their testimonials, they downplay the difference and emphasize shared values. Believing that dialogue and personal exchange will in the end facilitate the end of prejudice, they seek connection in an effort to combat stereotypes. They perform their identity as in sync with the moderate Dutch religious norm. Liberal Jews might emphasize how they have been part of Dutch society after the expulsion from Spain (1492) and how they have contributed to the economic and cultural prosperity of the Netherlands during the golden age. They might also emphasize how Judaism is a non-missionary religion, which simply respects and appreciates religious diversity. Sometimes, they will clearly distinguish themselves and their practices from orthodox Jews and their more “conservative” inclinations. Liberal Judaism is modern. Islam, so I have heard many times, is, with regard to gender equality, really the most progressive religion of all. Here the figure of Khadija, a businesswoman and the first wife of Muhammed, is often referenced. When it comes to dealing with religious difference, Qur’an 16:36 (from Sura *al-Nahl*) is often invoked or the treaties of Muhammed with the Christians. It is not uncommon that such efforts are framed again in the binary of good and bad religion. *Liberal Jews and Muslims* are not the problem, but rather than interrupting the frame of good and bad religion, there is a risk that it is being reiterated and reinforced.

Some seek to *normalize* their religion by concealing those aspects that may be frowned upon or that may cause disturbance. Buddhists for example tend to downplay the ritual dimension of their practice and focus rather on meditation. Buddhism is a philosophy or a worldview, rather than a ritualized tradition. In his research focusing on the performance of Buddhist identity in the Netherlands, Jelle Wiering has called the “tendency to marginalize their material forms ... a particular coping mechanism that supports [Buddhists’] attempt to deal with

²⁹ Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious hermeneutics, prejudice, and the problem of testimonial injustice," *Religious Education* 114 (2019).

³⁰ An interesting recent publication surveys different coping mechanisms Muslim students in Flanders develop in coping with Islamophobia. It would be interesting to explore, if and to what extent these mechanisms also are deployed by other “others” in a context of interfaith learning. The mechanisms I mention are based on my own observations, they are not the result of qualitative research. Ans De Nolf, Leen d’Haenens, and Abdelwahed Mekki-Berrada, "Face to Face with Anti-Muslim Sentiment: A Qualitative Study into the Coping Mechanisms of Young College and University Muslim Students and Graduates in Flanders," *Religions* 12, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020135>.

Dutch cultural secularism.”³¹ In this regard, I recall a conversation with one of my Buddhist students (who was raised Protestant), who realized that her performance of her Buddhist practice was mapped on an idea(l) of Protestant religion. Some of my Jewish students have told me that they sometimes hide their Star of David, so as not to be questioned about Israel and their possible Zionist commitments. For some students, the possibility of concealment does not exist—for example Muslims wearing a headscarf or niqab.

I have, however, also noticed a reaction which I call dialogue fatigue—that is, a reluctance or indifference in continuing to participate in dialogical activities because one is not heard or taken seriously. It happens that those who have experienced othering can no longer bring up the energy to keep battling for more inclusion. They disengage, because dialogue does not change their societal position or the exclusion they experience, and in a context of unequal power relations they do not succeed sufficiently in changing the frame³². This reaction has sometimes triggered the reaction from Christian participants that “it is a pity that others are not so committed to dialogue as they.”³³

When we zoom in on those who benefit from the norm, a narrative approach to interfaith learning will not suffice to disrupt the self-evidence of religious normativity. Indeed, because the (post)secular frame of good and bad religion is being constantly reiterated as normative and as *true*, and because those who self-identify with this norm are privileged, there is little incentive for them to undertake a critical analysis exploring it as a social construct which negatively impacts religious minorities in their daily lives. One of the reasons, furthermore, why it is extra difficult in a context of dialogical learning to uncover the play of legitimization and delegitimization is the fact that very idea of religious stratification does not match with most dialoguers’ sense of self, especially those who belong to the majority. Not only is it likely that dialoguers will consider their liberal democratic society as one which, contrary to many other societies, has laws that protect against religious discrimination—laws that are the outcome of the modern Enlightenment and the religio-secular divide—many, furthermore, will consider religion as a private affair and a personal choice. Liberal society as tolerant, modern, and emancipated, at least that seems to be the assumption, protects “this choice, allowing individuals the freedom to pursue their existing religion, question it, abandon it, or share it with others”³⁴. This acclaimed innocence makes it more difficult to recognize and take responsibility for contemporary expressions of religious stratification, especially when it comes to their own implication. To recognize that the projection of religion as *personal* and *apolitical* is itself a *political* frame is even harder to grasp.

To add to this problem, those who are drawn to interfaith initiatives tend to self-identify as “good” people, who are concerned about growing intolerance and polarization in our pluralizing societies. They recognize the problem of (religious) exclusivism and believe in any

³¹ Jelle Wiering, ““Others think I am airy-fairy” : Practicing Navayana Buddhism in a Dutch secular climate,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 17, no. 2 (2016): 385.

³² I have not come across this notion in interfaith circles specifically, but I am probably inspired by notions like gender fatigue and racial equity fatigue, which are notions that circulate. Considering the context in which I wrote the article, the notion of zoom fatigue was probably also in the back of my mind, though this clearly belongs though a different discourse.

³³ I am sure other “coping strategies” may be detected. In this regard, more qualitative research is needed.

³⁴ Tiffany Puett, “The Political Discourse of Religious Pluralism: World Religions Textbooks, Liberalism, and Civic Identities” (PhD Thesis in Religious Studies, University of Waterloo, 2014), 28.

case that people who orient around religion differently ought to collaborate more. Usually, they tend to see themselves as liberal, progressive, and open-minded, and they position themselves beyond the exclusionary, triumphalist, and hegemonic patterns of thinking characteristic of a past that they have rejected and transcended. Besides, the dialogical turn is projected as a deliberate break with the past and this makes it hard to reflect on the continuing presence of the past. The past of triumphalism is overcome in the turn to dialogue. This self-image may lead dialoguers, who belong to the majority and hence are not affected by *religious* marginalization, to claim a certain innocence, which may conceal an active ignorance or “not wanting to know” on how their own discourses tap into ideological assumptions about religion and religious diversity.³⁵ To the degree that they are convinced they have already ‘arrived’, they would much rather invest their energy in ensuring that others likewise embrace the dialogical values of openness, humility, and hospitality than in any critical examination of how they how they continue to perpetuate and bear witness to a history of religious stratification.

Due to the power imbalance in the dialogical space, which can be reinforced by a sense of dialogical innocence, an exchange of personal (micro)stories will simply not suffice to do justice to the discrepant experiences of those who embody the norm and those who deviate from it.³⁶ What is rather called for is a conscious, critical exploration of religious normativity (rather than learn from those who are different). What is to be perceived as *normal* when it comes to religion and what, by contrast, is abnormal? Who produces the knowledge about what is normal religion and what is deviation? Which policies are put in place to establish religious normalcy and contain the problem of deviation? Where do our collective negative stereotypes about religious otherness come from and what do these images have to do with our self-image as progressive and liberal? What does this mean for my classroom?

Towards a Critical Approach to Interfaith Learning: Establishing a New Program

Because it can be difficult for students to consider that the liberal idea of religion as a personal choice may be embroiled in the process of religious stratification and because it is difficult for them to contemplate that the dialogical turn itself may be implicated in a process of legitimization/delegitimization, I have developed a critical interfaith pedagogy that moves away from the idea of presumed dialogical reciprocity and equality (which enables students who belong to the majority to nestle comfortably) and therefore away from the ideal of the co-production of knowledge. I have decided to approach interfaith learning with a critical theoretical lens, which explicitly takes unequal power relations into account. Rather than solely focusing on an exchange of personal stories, I seek to shift the gaze to exploring and disrupting (religious) normativity. This implies a shift from focusing on the micro level of personal histories to the macro level of society’s cultural archive: rather than asking *what do you hold true? What do you value, hope and aspire?*, we must ask: *what frames our thoughts, our values, hopes and truths before we decide to think for ourselves? Where do these frames come from and which parties had an interest in crafting these frames?*

A key component of this critical approach to interfaith learning is a *longue durée* approach, which explores historico-culturally determined construction of religious normativity over against religious deviance at key moments in European history. Together we examine how the idea(l) of

³⁵ Wekker, *White innocence : Paradoxes of colonialism and race*, 17.

³⁶ I am using the notion of dialogical innocence as a variation to the notion White innocence.

religious normativity has been constructed at different historical moments in Europe (and its colonies), in different social locations, and different political contexts. We scrutinize whose perspective, values, norms, and interests are reflected in this idea(l) and how that impacted the construction of figures of religious deviation. We look into different policies that have been put in place to govern religious difference and study the establishment of religious stratification throughout history. Finally, we consider how some of the past assumptions that have been projected onto religious others continue to impact us today in ways that we are often unaware of.³⁷

The goal is to understand how throughout history structures of religious inequality have been put in place, so that my students—certainly, those who belong to the majority—become less certain about their own (Christo-secular) innocence; and so that a (fragile) hermeneutical space opens up in which they are ready to consider the possibility that their proper generation is invested in the establishment of problematic systems of differentiation. The learning objectives of this critical-historical approach are:

- To be able to grasp how religious stratification throughout history functions; namely that those who have the power to define true religion, have the power to discredit, marginalize and govern those who are single out as adhering to false or deviant religion.
 - To make insightful how the negotiation of the conceptual boundaries of religion (normativity) goes hand in hand with the process of drawing the boundaries of non-religion or false religion (deviance).
 - To become aware of the fact that the projection of a religious norm in any given socio-political context serves the interests of those in power.
 - To understand the correlation between the effort to establish a religious norm and religious *othering* and realize that is projected throughout history onto religious others tells us more about those trying to formulate a certain religious norm than about those others.
- To see how collective negative stereotypes about religious minorities build up over time until they become part of society's cultural archive and how those in power, at various historical moments, and depending on their interests, made use of this cultural archive and retrieve dormant categories to create an image of otherness that serves them well.
- To be able to understand the presence of the past and answer the question, *Where does our current understanding of religious normativity as well as our image of religious deviance come from?*

While the topic of religious stratification may be approached from a macro-historical perspective—for example, a European history of religious legitimation and delegitimation—the question should always be addressed: how does this play out on a national, and perhaps even local, level? Macrohistories therefore ought to be complemented with microhistories (for example, zooming in on the Dutch context).

³⁷ Marianne Moyaert, *Patterns of Religionization: a history of selfing and othering* (Wiley-Blackwell, Forthcoming 2023).

In my own interfaith leadership program, I will, for example, explore the genealogy of tolerance—a key value in the Netherlands—and how the idea of tolerance as a virtue was constructed by Enlightenment thinkers by casting Jews, Muslims, and Catholics as incapable of tolerance and projecting these religions as symbolic carriers of problematic religion, which were probably not deserving of toleration. How is that still the case today? We also explore, however, how Dutch progressive values revolving around sexuality and gender equality develop and how they are used to collectively discredit Muslims as either oppressive or oppressed (and in need of emancipation). How does this relate to much older patterns of sexual slander aimed towards Christianity's others: pagans, Jews, and Muslims? To what extent is the dematerialized and deritualized understanding of religion connected to the long Reformation and its war against idolatry?³⁸

The risk of a historical approach is that students might step outside the hermeneutical circle and approach the problem under scrutiny from a mere outsider's perspective. In a context of interfaith learning, however, the idea is that we are all somehow affected or impacted by ideals of religious normativity. We are, as Oddbjørn Leirvik puts it, always implicated.³⁹ We either benefit from these ideals or we experience harm or exclusion. Starting from this assumption, I combine this *historicizing* approach with a major investment in critical self-reflection and I continue to challenge students to keep a logbook in which they acquire the habit of critical self-reflection: where do they stand, where do they speak from, how do they relate to the norm, how are they implicated in process of religious othering? To what extent do they perpetuate essentialized normative assumptions about good and bad religion and to what extent do they catch themselves projecting such assumptions onto others, thereby (implicitly or explicitly) delegitimizing 'others' beliefs and practices? However, I also ask them, if and to what extent they have experienced this normative frame as oppressive and exclusionary. After all, the starting point of the transformation of inequality is developing an awareness of oppressive social structures.

Finally, and using a variety of didactical approaches, I create a dialogical space in which students *together* can explore how discourses and practices of religious normativity and deviation affect them. I will ask them to share stories about when they have felt excluded or marginalized and how they reacted. I challenge those who self-identify as belonging to the norm to share stories about when they came to realize they perpetuated patterns of religious othering and how that realization made them feel. I also invite them to exchange more positive stories—accounts, for example, of time when they stood up for someone else or when they felt supported by someone else. Considering the fact that patterns of religious othering are socially constructed and human-made, I believe they can be unmade too. For that reason, students together explore what would be needed to form an interfaith alliance that is empowering and transformative and what would be needed to construct a more inclusive space of interfaith learning.⁴⁰

³⁸ Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The reformation of worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

³⁹ Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious studies: a relational approach to religious activism and the study of religion* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

⁴⁰ A reviewer of this essay asked whether I had considered having students explore how this critical approach relates to their own faith and/or non-faith traditions and values. I have not yet done this, but it is a good suggestion.



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