

Asynchronous Online Instruction at the Intersection of Chaplain Formation and Interreligious Studies: A Response to Jones and Meyer¹

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Abstract: From her vantage-point as a member of the faculty of an institution that differs significantly from those profiled by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer, an instructor with deep experience in facilitation of asynchronous online learning describes her own approach, in conversation with insights on the characteristics of interreligious/interfaith pedagogy presented in their “Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment.”

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“Institutional context shapes everything,” observe Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer in their pedagogical study to which this chapter responds: “the type of courses instructors teach, how they teach them, their learning outcomes, and where the courses sit in the broader curriculum.” Of the nine venues in which Jones and Meyer conducted their pedagogical research, eight are undergraduate institutions, largely secular, offering an interfaith/interreligious studies course, program, certificate, or minor to students whose orientation toward religion may fall anywhere on the spectrum from wholehearted enthusiasm to disdain. The ninth is a small graduate school (within a large university) whose primary purpose is the formation of Christian leaders. Hence, we can presume that its students already have a robust relationship with religion or are at least highly sympathetic toward those who do. My context, Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly, Hartford Seminary; and, hereafter in this essay, HIU) differs significantly from those in which Jones and Meyer conducted their research. Yet, in my teaching for HIU will be found the seven characteristics of interreligious/interfaith pedagogy that Jones and Meyer discerned in the instruction they analyzed. In what follows, I hold in mind those characteristics and the questions provoked by them as I describe my own approach.

To begin, it is important to know that I teach for a free-standing, multireligious graduate school that sees itself as “providing cutting-edge research and immersive learning opportunities that enable leaders and institutions to thrive in a religiously complex world.”² Its student body is approximately 40% Muslim, 40% Christian, 10% Jewish—with considerable variety in the remaining 10%. Thus, opportunities for experience of religious diversity abound in almost every course. Improvement in students’ ability to demonstrate knowledge of their own religion and in their capacity to engage others respectfully is expected. For this to be measurable, students’ disclosure of and reflection on their religious location or journey is necessary. Such disclosure by instructors is commonplace. The content of most courses contributes to professional formation of chaplains, congregational leaders, educators, conflict mitigation specialists, and scholars—or has practical application in those and other fields. Hence, four of the pedagogical characteristics on the Jones/Meyer list—experience of religious diversity, opportunity for students’ reflection on their own religious journeys, instructor self-disclosure of (or reflection on) religious identity,

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

² Quoting Hartford International University marketing materials from Fall 2021.

forging of connections to professional skills—are integral to the HIU curriculum. They inform my approach, which is well known for its incorporation of the other three characteristics on the Jones/Meyer list: extensive use of case method, instruction in and opportunities for dialogue, and fostering of literacy (both religious and interreligious/interfaith).

How does such a pedagogy play out? As co-director (with Dr. Bilal Ansari) of HIU’s Master of Arts in Chaplaincy program, I teach the foundational course, *Chaplaincy Models and Methods*. I also teach the course that serves both as the gateway to our Master of Arts in Interreligious Studies program and as a core element of our Master of Arts in International Peacebuilding program. When I plan a course for this context, I have three goals: I want my students to increase their command of the subject’s particular content; I want them to finish the course with enhanced learning skills which will serve them well in the future—whatever the subject matter or the venue for knowledge acquisition; and I want to sharpen my own skills as an educator. I work toward these goals with creativity, flexibility, and enthusiasm—and, since the fall term of 2016, in asynchronous online mode exclusively. Because I teach asynchronously, I embrace a version of “flipped classroom” pedagogy. I stress to the students that they are in charge of their own learning. I am the facilitator who lays out and guides them around a banquet of “learning objects”—items to watch, hear, or read; activities to complete.

No matter what the course, I stipulate a working definition of “religion.” Following H. Byron Earhart, I see it as “a distinctive set of beliefs, rituals, doctrines, institutions, and practices that enables the members of that tradition to establish, maintain, and celebrate *a meaningful world*,” thus tantamount to *worldview* or *life-stance*.³ I appreciate the breadth of this definition. I also heed Laurie Patton’s reminder that “every definition needs to be interrogated by new and emerging content. Even if we end up reverting to it at the end of our inquiry.”⁴ Therefore, the syllabus may also include a unit in which the term “religion” is examined in depth.

Even before my institution renamed itself and its degree programs, I used “interfaith” and “interreligious” as synonyms—and the latter almost to the exclusion of the former. I am maintaining that practice. I define “interreligious studies” as an intersectional, integrative academic field that promotes deep understanding of worldviews different from one’s own and cultivates the dynamic link between theory and practice as it engages in critical investigation of relations between people (whether individuals or groups) who orient around “religion” differently (howsoever religion be defined).⁵ I follow Paul Hedges in seeing interreligious studies as an interdisciplinary approach that goes well beyond simple comparison to involve “religious encounter as a dynamic lived reality,” all the while exhibiting an abundance of concern for “the relational aspect of religion and the dynamic change and interaction of traditions.” It “involves self-critical reflection” with regard to power and identity, “pushes against the hegemonic

³ H. Byron Earhart, ed., *Religious Traditions of the World* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 7.

⁴ Laurie L. Patton, “And Are We Not of Interest to Each Other?” American Academy of Religion 2019 Presidential Address, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 3 (September 2020): 639–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaa044>.

⁵ See my “What *Is* Interreligious Studies? Considerations from the ‘Between’”—chapter 1 in Lucinda Mosher, ed., *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022). My definition draws upon Eboo Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies,” *Liberal Education* 99 (2013): 38; Deanna Ferree Womack, “From the History of Religions to Interfaith Studies,” in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies*, 24–25; and “Introduction,” in *Ibid.*, xii.

boundaries,” and does not require a “clear boundary between the scholar and the practitioner” or between “theological questioning” and “scholarly reflection.”⁶

Hartford International’s master’s degree in Interreligious Studies (MAIRS) is a 36-credit hour graduate degree that provides strong grounding in the foundational concepts and methods of the field as it engages students in advanced academic study of the lived reality of religions in public multifaith contexts—and relations between them. Required courses include team-taught seminars. Elective courses and a “final requirement” (thesis or project) enable specialization. The MAIRS curriculum facilitates the interaction of students from different religious traditions as they study the various topics and disciplines of religion. Whereas, in the nine cases studied by Jones and Meyer, it was necessary to go outside the classroom and beyond the circle of learners in order to have “encounters with religious diversity,” my HIU course rosters usually are quite multireligious. My online students encounter this inherent religious manyness in the discussion forums, in comment threads on pre-recorded lectures, and in assigned one-on-one conversations. Yet, I still value and make room in the course for site visits and guest lecturers.

As I have designed it, *Introduction to Interreligious Studies* is an intersectional, integrative course that promotes deep understanding of worldviews different from one’s own. The course integrates theory and practice in exploring how diverse individuals and groups understand “religion” and how those with differing understandings relate to one another. It cultivates the dynamic link between theory and practice as it engages in critical investigation of relations between people (whether individuals or groups) who orient around “religion” differently. As students learn about this field’s history, its core principles, and its signature methodologies, they consider such themes as the meaning of “religion,” the discourse of “othering,” theologies of religious difference, comparative theology, interreligious hermeneutics, urban social history methodologies, interreligious dialogue, and faith-based collaboration—all the while improving their religious and interreligious literacy and developing skills necessary for interreligious engagement.⁷

Stephen Prothero defines religious literacy as “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives.”⁸ I don’t disagree. However, I am more concerned that students in our MA programs gain what Eboo Patel calls “appreciative knowledge” about the many religions practiced in the US than that they internalize any particular list of key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, and so on. That is, I expect that exactly *what* is learned will differ from one class member to the next. Hence, I have devised a tool for assessing students’ religious literacy baseline and progress. By including in each module the shining of a spotlight on a particular religion, it may seem that I am superimposing a world religions course on another. However, the course-time apportioned for acquisition of facts about specific religions is comparatively small; and my purpose is spotlighting has mostly to do with making sure that course participants know where to turn when religion-specific questions arise.

⁶ See Paul Hedges, “Interreligious Studies: A New Direction in the Study of Religion?” in *Bulletin of the British Association for the Study of Religions* (November 2014).

⁷ Jones and Meyer note that they have chosen not to provide a formal definition of *dialogue*. I, however, usually do. As I define the term, *dialogue* is a dialectical mode of relationship—a particular genre of conversation that takes time, patience, and agreed-upon strategies.

⁸ Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 11–12.

Obviously, *Introduction to Interreligious Studies* is a vehicle for learning what “interreligious studies” is. In it, the core principles of the discipline of interreligious studies are simultaneously examined and employed. However, *because of* what interreligious studies is, I tell my students to expect that we shall always be doing several things at once. Therefore, while each module focuses on a particular aspect of interreligious studies, every module also addresses religious literacy in some way; and several give particular attention to peacebuilding in interreligious perspective. The course makes considerable use of experiential methodologies—among them, study in pairs, site-visiting, interviewing, and of course, working with decision-based case studies. Calling case method the “signature pedagogy” of the field, Jones and Meyer wonder whether and how it takes students beyond skills and action to “kinds of analysis, critical thinking, and development of a civic orientation.” In my courses, case assignments are opportunities to assess actual situations from multiple vantage-points. That process requires connection-making to other course resources; and that facilitates the move toward critical thinking, civic orientation, and practical application.

In *Chaplaincy Models and Methods*, the core principles of the discipline of interreligious studies are employed, but not examined. As with *Introduction to Interreligious Studies*, this course is designed to expand students’ multireligious understanding as it introduces (or reviews) the breadth of the spiritual caregiving profession and the importance of embodying the standards of practice embraced by the field’s major credentialing agencies. Enrollees are introduced to the integration of theory and practice of spiritual caregiving, and to exploration of theological claims about the transcendent, human beings, and the nature and meaning of healing or suffering from a plethora of religious perspectives: Muslim and Christian, yes; but also Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Humanist, and several others. These themes and more are addressed further in the program’s other required courses, electives, and fieldwork requirements.

Significantly, in developing new master’s degree programs, HIU has embraced a form of competency-based education—which is most obvious in our quite deliberate and explicit keying of the goals and outcomes of each element of the chaplaincy curriculum to the BCCI’s *Common Qualifications and Competencies for Professional Chaplains*. Therefore, it was with great interest that I read Christine Hong’s recent *Decolonial Futures*, in which she calls the usefulness of competency inventories into question.⁹ Hong makes a compelling case for “unseating the term ‘competency,’” because of its violent foundations and its problematic assumption that attainment of “mastery in a culture or religion outside one’s own” is even possible.¹⁰ She calls for replacement of a “competency framework” with development of “interreligious and intercultural intelligence” centered through the voices, experiences, and narratives of minoritized people and defined as “an embodied posture. . . of humility, deep listening, and understanding.” Such a posture, she asserts, enables fearless engagement “in the sharp critique of the powers that be.”¹¹ Hong does say that competency-based education models make sense—that competency is indeed a positive thing—in vocations in which mastery of topics and skills is a matter of life or death. I believe that

⁹ Christine J. Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious intelligence for Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 2.

¹⁰ Hong, 17.

¹¹ Hong, 9, 21. See also, Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). His seven intelligences are musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

chaplaincy is such a vocation. Chaplains work with vulnerable populations, after all. Therefore, we should want them to be proficient.¹²

All of the above informs my reflection on my own pedagogy at the intersection of chaplain formation and interreligious studies. Yes, I note: I pay much attention to the BCCI's list of qualifications and standards—and this includes provision of a tool for student self-assessment. About that tool one student remarked, “Exploring my own competencies and qualifications for chaplaincy caused me to realize the areas where I needed to concentrate my efforts.” I also employ the “wise interfaith caregiving” paradigm developed by Leah Dawn Bueckert and Daniel S. Schipani. It emphasizes the integration of *knowing, being, and doing*—categories which Bueckert and Schipani define and describe in detail.¹³ To be wise, they contend, is to be competent. By competencies, they mean *necessary dispositions and capacities*—that is, “those personal and professional qualities or assets with which caregivers meet the standards of practice in a wide variety of care giving situations.”¹⁴ In their model, professional wisdom's core competencies of being, knowing, and doing correlate with professional standards: chaplaincy's key values, vocational commitments, and legally binding professional and ethical requirements. As Bueckert and Schipani see it, the formation of truly *wise* interfaith professional spiritual caregivers involves a combination of pedagogies that broaden and deepen multireligious understanding, foster ability to be a gracious and wise presence, and cultivate comfort with the art of “companioning.”

As I do for the BCCI list of competencies and qualifications, I provide my students with tools for self-tracking of progress toward the *dispositions and capacities* outlined by Bueckert and Schipani as essential for wise spiritual caregiving. I also measure improvement in multireligious fluency, but *not* in a manner that demands internalization of a fixed list of facts or vocabulary. I challenge hegemonic frameworks, pivot toward justice matters as they arise, and encourage my students to do likewise. In short, my approach to chaplaincy education is informed by the methodologies and concerns of Interreligious Studies itself: interdisciplinarity, intersectionality, prioritizing the margins, preference for dialogical approaches; and my approach to introducing the field of Interreligious Studies per se involves large measures of wise spiritual caregiving. I cannot help but use the term *competency*, but I believe I mean by it something similar to Hong's notions of intelligence and proficiency.

Without doubt, Interreligious Studies is served quite well by many instructional modes. However, the asynchronous online instructional mode (with which, as explained above, I am well practiced) is uniquely suited to it—a point argued by my HIU colleague, educational design expert Brian Clark.¹⁵ Highly effective online education, he explains, makes use of insights and practices from philosophies exemplified by the inherently dialogical Community of Inquiry Model of distance education. “It is hard to imagine a philosophy of education more suited to interreligious studies,” Clark says, “since it stresses the interplay between the learning that takes place within each individual and the learning that takes place between and among members of

¹² See the review by Axel Marc Oaks Takacs of Christine Hong's *Decolonial Futures* in *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 33 (August 2021): 113–16.

¹³ See Leah Dawn Bueckert and Daniel S. Schipani, eds., *You Welcomed Me: Interfaith Spiritual Care in the Hospital* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Bueckert and Schipani, 170.

¹⁵ Clark makes this point in a conversation included in Lucinda Mosher, “What *Is* Interreligious Studies? Considerations from the ‘Between,’” in *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, 3–14.

the learning community.”¹⁶ With its emphasis on *Social Presence* (engagement of each participant with other participants and in relation to the course community), *Teaching Presence* (the instructor’s engagement with participants and through the design of the social and cognitive environment), and *Cognitive Presence* (individual learning through engagement with course content), the Community of Inquiry Model transcends the physical absence that is an obvious attribute of asynchronous courses.¹⁷

Clark notes that the essential insight of the Community of Inquiry Model “is that the learning of individual participants best flourishes in the midst of a highly supportive and highly engaged community that works together to learn and make meaning.” In this model, the role of the teacher has to do with “curating and cultivating the learning community, arranging the social and cognitive environment in which communal and individual meaning making can flourish, serving as host and convener of the community.” The value of this model for interreligious education is that it offers clear guidance on the design of courses and the role of teachers who wish to create deeply dialogical learning communities that can provide these vital forms of presence—even at a distance.

Having distilled a list of common characteristics of interreligious/interfaith studies education, researchers Jones and Meyer have yet another question for all of us in the field: “So, how has your teaching changed over the past three years?” Beneath this question lies another: is it now possible to discuss American religious diversity without also thinking about race? They sense that many Interreligious Studies instructors have become more deliberate in addressing systemic racism. I am one. In recent syllabi, the topic’s presence is now more overt. Typically, my courses include lessons in ethics and the cultivation of leadership, interreligious collaboration, and communication skills. That continues; but the range of voices informing my lectures and being encountered through reading assignments is significantly broader.

Indeed, context is everything. Seated, as I am, at the intersection of chaplaincy formation and Interreligious Studies, I strive to design courses in which the independent studying so characteristic of asynchronous learning is balanced by multiple means of interaction (among the enrollees and between them and me)—such that a sense of “belonging to a circle of learners” can develop early on, then can sustain itself to the end of the semester. Members of my recent dialogical learning communities—for which employment of Interreligious Studies methods and insights may have been either explicit or implied—have applauded this pedagogy’s relational aspects, its flexibility in working with concepts from a variety of locations, and its emphasis on critical self-reflection on one’s own spaces in the “between.” In every instance, the goal is provision of immersive learning opportunities that will enhance participants’ ability to thrive in a religiously complex world.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For more detail on the relationships between Social Presence, Teaching Presence, and Cognitive presence, see the Community of Inquiry website, <http://www.thecommunityofinquiry.org/coi>.



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