

The Journal of Interreligious Studies

Published by Hebrew College, Boston University School of Theology, & Hartford International University for Religion and Peace

**Issue 36
May 2022**

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We remain grateful to Dr. Stephanie Varnon-Hughes and Rabbi Joshua M. Z. Stanton for their vision and commitment to interreligious engagement by founding the Journal under its original title, the Journal of Interreligious Dialogue, in 2009.

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Critical Pedagogies in the Interfaith/Interreligious Studies Classroom: From the Editor-in-Chief¹

Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.

--bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*²

The number of scholars who are engaging the field of interfaith/interreligious studies is growing. These scholars are responding to the need to cultivate in their students not just interfaith/interreligious and intercultural literacy, but what Christine Hong calls proficiency and intelligence.³ The number of courses, programs, certificates, and degrees in interfaith/interreligious studies is also on the rise.⁴ Educators are employing innovative teaching strategies in their courses. In other words, as the discipline expands, so must the pedagogies.

One of the purviews of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* is to share innovative pedagogies and best practices for the interfaith/interreligious studies classroom. The extensively researched article by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer does just that. Jones and Meyer observed interfaith/interreligious studies courses and interviewed their instructors and students across eight campuses. They describe the pedagogies, assignments, and classroom strategies in these varying contexts and summarize their findings in seven pedagogical themes and practices, reflecting critically on what these pedagogies reveal about the learning objectives of interfaith and interreligious studies itself.

The research by Jones and Meyer is a treasure trove of pedagogical insights. The article by itself provides interfaith/interreligious studies educators with creative insights to the applied nature of interreligious engagement and understanding. Furthermore, educators can adopt, adapt, and otherwise employ some of the pedagogies outlined in their article. In other words, it is a must read for any interfaith/interreligious studies scholar developing a course in the field.

The JIRS publishing team, along with Interfaith Youth Core (now, Interfaith America) staff, brainstormed ways to amplify and augment this incredible resource. We decided to invite critical and constructive responses from scholars and educators who work within the field of interfaith/interreligious studies or in disciplines, departments, or schools in which interfaith/interreligious and intercultural learning is prioritized.

¹ This opening essay frames 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, including the original article and the responses, visit <http://irstudies.org>.

² bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

³ See Christine Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021).

⁴ I encourage you to view the Map of Academic Degree Programs in Interreligious and Interfaith Studies maintained by the Association for Interreligious/Interfaith Studies at <https://www.aiistudies.org/map-of-academic-programs>. This is a growing list and continually updated. In fact, if your program, be it degree, certificate, or otherwise, is not listed, please kindly let them know so that they may update it.

Some respondents are presently at institutions at which Jones and Meyer observed courses years ago and are therefore directly or indirectly part of the original article; this thematic issue gives them the opportunity to demonstrate how their teaching or program has adapted to new circumstances or otherwise evolved. For instance, Kevin Minister reflects on how his decolonial approach to the interreligious studies classroom is a significant shift from how he was teaching five years ago. Amy Allocco hosted the research team at Elon University and considers five years' worth of assessment data concerning their Interreligious Studies minor and Multifaith Scholars program. Suzanne Henderson underscores the import of interdisciplinary pedagogies and relationship building in the interfaith/interreligious studies classroom.

Some of the respondents are scholars and educators from within the field of interfaith/interreligious studies; they can thus add insights from their own practices. Kate DeConinck has a vast range of experiences at various institutions and hails from a background in anthropology of religion with expertise in the contemporary American context; she thus critically augments the observations by Jones and Meyer regarding how institutional contexts shape the interfaith/interreligious studies classroom. Hans Gustafson constructively proposes a *phronetic* (from *phronesis*, or “practical wisdom”) framework through which to understand the interfaith/interreligious studies classroom. Younus Mirza asks lingering questions for further research as pedagogies continue to develop, contexts change, and new classroom strategies are employed.

Others are educators and scholars hailing from departments or schools in theological studies or diversity and social justice education, or from graduate programs and seminaries; these voices offer external insights that reveal lacunae in undergraduate-focused interfaith/interreligious studies pedagogical research. Lucinda Mosher dwells insightfully on a major takeaway from the article, viz., that institutional context shapes everything; her experience and expertise teaching graduate-level asynchronous, online courses at the intersection of interreligious studies and chaplaincy education extends this takeaway beyond the original article. Khyati Joshi is a researcher and practitioner of social justice education whose scholarly work focuses on examining race, religion (and their intersections) in America; she offers a critical appraisal from this vantage point. Christine Hong teaches educational ministry and theology at a seminary; her expertise and experience in decolonial approaches to interreligious and intercultural theologies provides readers with additional points of examination.

While the pedagogies of interfaith/interreligious studies have some overlap with those of standard religious studies and theology, there are important distinctions. The article by Jones and Meyer, along with the responses, underscore those differences. The distinctions are varied, but one may risk a generalization: pedagogies of interfaith/interreligious studies are praxis-oriented and thus reflect what one may call “embodied learning.” Learning objectives move beyond mere religious or cultural literacy—a memorization of facts or data about religious traditions—and beyond competencies in theories and methods in the study of religion or theology. They move toward the embodied practice of living (justly, equitably) in a religiously, culturally, and racially diverse world. As Jones and Meyer indicate, there is an applied dimension to interfaith/interreligious studies. This applied dimension takes seriously *lived religion* and *embodiment* in a world marked by inequalities, inequities, and injustices that disproportionately and negatively impact religiously, racially, and culturally minoritized communities. Pedagogies in interfaith/interreligious studies attend explicitly to the concrete, lived reality of diverse

communities; religion is not an abstract, disembodied idea, but is only ever encountered embodied, emplaced, and enacted in the world.

Conceptualizing these pedagogies as levels of knowledge or wisdom is helpful, from literacy, to intelligence, to proficiency. Here I am deeply indebted to the language, framework, and theories brilliantly explicated by Christine Hong, whose ideas I engage while taking them in different directions Dr. Hong may not have envisioned.⁵

Literacy

Interfaith/Interreligious literacy provides students with the basic building blocks for understanding intra- and interreligious diversity. To possess interfaith/interreligious literacy is to be able to identify and explain various religious and interreligious histories, contexts, traditions, theologies, practices, ethics, and values. But literacy is the bare minimum and can often reduce complex religious traditions into neatly bundled packets of rote-memorized information. Literacy that continues to rely on the so-called World Religions Paradigm (WRP) is deeply problematic; but it is evident that most courses in interfaith/interreligious studies abandon this paradigm.⁶ Interfaith/Interreligious literacy must take into critical account recent theories and methods in the study of religion that challenge and subvert the WRP. The goal is to understand religion through a critical, embodied, feminist, postcolonial, decolonizing, philosophical hermeneutical phenomenology that takes seriously syncretic, hybrid, subaltern, intersectional, and lived religious communities, practices, and traditions embodied, emplaced, and enacted under kyriarchy.⁷

Intelligence

Interfaith/Interreligious intelligence is the intellectual, social, and imaginative capacity to apply interfaith/interreligious literacy to various contexts in students’ lives. Students with interfaith/interreligious intelligence should be able to employ their knowledge in making judgments about the best course of action in any given interfaith/interreligious context. These judgments are not neutral but grounded in justice-oriented critical thinking that seeks to construct a world in which religious pluralism and diversity is affirmed and in which the wellbeing of historically marginalized communities is prioritized.

⁵ See Christine J. Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), as well as my review of her book in the *JIRS*: <https://irstudies.org/index.php/jirs/article/view/667>.

⁶ In this matter I cannot recommend enough Paul Hedges’ textbook: *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021). I encourage readers to peruse the review in the *JIRS* (<https://irstudies.org/index.php/jirs/article/view/609>).

⁷ Kyriarchy, a term coined by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, refers to the “socio-cultural and religious system of domination...constituted by intersecting multiplicative structures of oppression” (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005], 118). Kyriarchy includes, *inter alia*, Christian supremacy, racism, speciesism, cis heterosexism, classism, racial capitalism, colonialism, militarism, ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, ableism, ageism, and nationalism.

Proficiency

Finally, interfaith/interreligious proficiency is the repeated practice of embodying, emplacing, and enacting interfaith/interreligious intelligence in the real world. Students develop habits of mind, inquiry, and action that shape how they relate to self and others in the context of a religiously diverse—and unequal—world. Because it is the *embodied practice* of interfaith/interreligious intelligence, pedagogies and assessments in the classroom move beyond disembodied learning; conversations, site visits, real-world problem solving, praxis-oriented projects, engagement with material religion, and more are featured in this sort of embodied learning.

When combined, students with interfaith/interreligious literacy, intelligence, and proficiency possess a set of skills, values, and commitments that should prioritize not merely the just and equitable treatment of religiously, culturally, and racially diverse members of society, but also the liberation from kyriarchy at every level. The former attains more often at the personal or organizational level; the latter is at the systemic and structural level. The former is often more practical and indeed even more viable in the job market; the latter is far more difficult to achieve, more aspirational, and often less sought-after in the job market. It is to this dilemma I now turn.

Transgressing the Limits of Interfaith/Interreligious Studies in the (Neoliberal) Academy

I am writing this editor's introduction at the end of the spring semester in which I am teaching a course entitled, "Islamophobia: Theology, History, and Contemporary Contexts." I assign Nazia Kazi's critically insightful and accessible *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*.⁸ We have just finished discussing one of her later chapters, "Culture Talk as Islamodiversion." She argues that conceptualizing anti-Muslim racism as an individual prejudice leads to the proposed solution: we can change Islamophobic hearts and minds through education, information, and religio-cultural literacy and thereby slowly eradicate anti-Muslim racism. However, Kazi entirely and sharply disagrees with this assessment, which *mis*-conceptualizes Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism that is private, personal, individualized, and entirely attitudinal.

No. Islamophobia is anti-Muslim racism that is *embedded* in our current political and economic structures, in our paramilitary police state, and in the missions of our global military operations. Islamophobia is systemic because *racism is systemic*. She then gives examples that illustrate the problem of focusing on what Mahmood Mamdani calls "Culture Talk," which "assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and...then explains politics as a consequence of that essence."⁹ This is effectively cultural racism, and thankfully critical scholars and educators of interfaith/interreligious studies are actively teaching *against* this, as evidenced in this special issue.

However, Nazia Kazi employs culture talk in a different but related way and asks a critical question about issues of systemic injustice and inequity that occur along racial and

⁸ Nazia Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics* (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021).

⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2005), 17.

religious lines: “What happens when we choose to engage in a dialogue about cultural diversity instead of about political facts? What happens when we turn to understanding each other’s religions rather than understanding history? I’d like to suggest that there’s a deep trade-off, a sacrifice that is made when we engage in culture talk.”¹⁰ Indeed, there is always a danger in the interfaith/interreligious studies classroom of occluding and ignoring the pernicious ways our present-day systems and structures perpetuate religious, racial, and cultural hierarchies—kyriarchy. In other words, focusing on religious literacy as a solution to religio-cultural bigotry may mask the hegemony of our current systems of kyriarchy—from racial capitalism to neocolonialism. In effect, it neoliberalizes the solution to injustices and inequities by focusing on individual biases, prejudices, and ignorance; if it extends beyond the personal, it remains at the organizational (non-profit, corporation, government agency, law firm, etc.). This sort of culture talk ignores political and economic structures of oppression. Educating for interfaith/interreligious intelligence and proficiency attempts to go beyond this and attend to socio-structural issues—systems and ideologies—but there are limits. These limits occur when we attend to the religio-cultural at the expense of the politico-economic; they also occur when educators are forced to function within a university system that mirrors the neoliberal market. I explain the former limit first, and then move to the latter.

Drawing from Nazia Kazi’s examples in her chapter, I offer the problem with religio-culture talk as I am deploying it. Students in an interfaith/interreligious studies classroom may leave with extensive knowledge on, say, the Islamic traditions: recognizing the so-called Five Pillars of Islam, the complex histories of societies of Muslims, understanding how communities of interpretation across differing contexts, from North Africa to South Asia, China, Europe, and North America, express and enact the Islamic traditions in variant—often beautiful—and even contradictory (but coherent) ways. They may get to know Muslims or a local mosque community through conversation and site visits, they may read and critically analyze pluralism case studies about anti-Muslim racism in terms of mosque building or public prayer spaces, they may learn about the experience of anti-Muslim bigotry, and they may even complete a project that applies their knowledge to their own future professional career, and so on. Let me be clear: this is phenomenal and far better than remaining ignorant of this religio-cultural knowledge.

However, this is only one piece of the puzzle; the second piece pertains to systemic and structural issues. They may remain ignorant of the US government’s extrajudicial kill list (predominantly featuring Muslims); ignorant of the Obama administration’s position that all Muslim males accidentally killed by drone strikes abroad were automatically considered combatants instead of civilians; ignorant of how the US-backed, Saudi-led war in Yemen has killed upwards of 250,000 civilians (Muslims);¹¹ ignorant of the nearly 200,000 civilian (Muslim) deaths from the Iraq War; ignorant of the 38 million (predominantly Muslim) people displaced as a result of the United States’ involvement in post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Libya, and Syria; ignorant of the plight of Palestinian Muslims and Christians; ignorant of FBI surveillance and entrapment of Muslim communities in the U.S.; ignorant of the ways in which China’s government exploits labor and extracts resources not just from the Uighur Muslims but from Muslim-majority nations through their Belt and Road

¹⁰ Kazi, 75.

¹¹ As of Feb 2022, 20 million civilians are in need of humanitarian assistance, 14.5 million do not have enough food, 4 million are displaced (the population of Yemen is roughly 30 million).

Initiative; ignorant, in general, of the destructive history of U.S. Empire building and its proxy wars in Muslim-majority regions of the world; and so on.

Students develop interreligious intelligence and proficiency; however, decolonial interreligious intelligence and proficiency is limited by the neoliberal academy and university. We need to *convince* students in professional programs that interfaith/interreligious studies will help them in their future careers. Indeed, it will! Interfaith/Interreligious studies will be increasingly important for students who are focusing on professional fields (e.g., business, social work, health professions, politics) that serve religiously plural communities. Interfaith/interreligious knowledge and skills provide an important degree of critical attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion inasmuch as religious and faith traditions are integral to the dynamics of gender, race, nationality, socioeconomic status, and more. Furthermore, religious and faith traditions are central to how most communities in our country and around the world discern value and meaning, discover truth, and act in the world. Accordingly, attention to interfaith/interreligious literacy, intelligence, and proficiency should be a necessary aspect of accomplishing any university's mission to transform students into leaders in their professional and community lives in a global society.

But there is a risk. We begin *to market* interreligious/interfaith studies within the logic of neoliberal capitalism: there is a high *rate of return* from the *investment* in interfaith/interreligious studies. This moves well beyond the *decolonial* goals of Christine Hong's interreligious and intercultural intelligence and proficiency (as far as I interpret it) and instead perpetuates the colonial and neocolonial present. But these are the limits of the neoliberal academy, perhaps. How else do we *sell* our majors, minors, and certificates? This is what the corporatized university wants from us.

This is the tension critical scholars and educators of interfaith/interreligious studies need to manage—myself included. Aware of the kyriarchy that marks our current systems, scholars and educators need to work within it to overturn it. They are pulled from two sides. On the one side is the demand for cultivating interfaith/interreligious knowledge and skills that are certainly better for students to have than to lack (on an individual and organizational level). That is, social workers, nurses, foreign service officers, lawyers, doctors, physical therapists, teachers, therapists, and so on who possess interfaith/interreligious intelligence and proficiency will certainly serve diverse communities more equitably and justly. This is a net good for society because it reduces the harm done to religiously minoritized members of society. But there is the other side: critical educators recognize that it is the kyriarchical logic and structure that need to be undone in the first place, because it is this logic that marginalizes Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and religiously minoritized communities locally and globally to begin with. The innovative and embodied pedagogies in the following pages emerge from this tension. Critical interfaith/interreligious studies scholars and educators *know* that they are stuck between a rock and a hard place; but they must act and educate for justice, nonetheless. In their pedagogies and classroom strategies, critical thinking is instilled in their students so that they can *not only* act with interfaith/interreligious intelligence and proficiency in their local communities and professional organizations *but also* recognize (and strive to overturn, brick by brick) the marginalizing and supremacist structures of our current global system.

In my view, the goal of critical interfaith/interreligious studies is like the goal of antiracism, and so I turn again to Nazia Kazi for a succinct summary of the heart of the dilemma:

The goal of principled antiracism is never to incorporate ‘minorities’ into an existing power structure. Asking to be integrated into the top of a racial hierarchy doesn’t dismantle the racial hierarchy; it leaves it intact. Principled antiracism means seeking to abolish the very *roots* of imperialism and racism. *Otherwise, we will be satisfied when arms dealers like Lockheed Martin set up Friday prayer spaces for their [Muslim] employees rather than thinking about the troubling role of the arms industry in the American economy.*¹²

Critical educators of interfaith/interreligious studies—like all critical pedagogues—are given a nearly impossible task: teaching against harmful systems and ideologies that perpetuate discrimination against Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and religiously minoritized communities while simultaneously having to work within those very systems. This is perhaps why some of the most innovative and creative teaching strategies come from these very same educators: when striving for the *seemingly impossible*—a decolonial *future* in which there is collective liberation—the *imagination* functions on overdrive.¹³

Conclusion

The Journal of Interreligious Studies is dedicating Issue No. 36 to this roundtable discussion, because, together, critical interfaith/interreligious studies scholars and educators should be tasked with proposing pedagogies and “positions of seeming impossibility made real...with an ethical agenda that is anticolonial and anticapitalist.”¹⁴ We may do so in broken ways, situated as we are in broken systems, but nonetheless with a spirit “that embodies [a] politics. . .of abolition and practices of nonhierarchy. . . [whose] aims speak to a future yet unknown. . .a reevaluation and a pushing of the boundaries of the world we inhabit.”¹⁵ I propose this as an aspiration that I encourage others to join, despite its seeming impossibility.

¹² Kazi, 96 (*emphasis mine*). Kazi elsewhere recounts the 2013 incident in which Gap featured a turban Sikh actor in their advertisement. “The ad was defaced with racial slurs such as ‘terrorist’ and ‘taxi driver’” (ibid., 63). Indeed, here it can be noted that perhaps more interfaith/interreligious literacy would have prevented such bigoted acts at an individual, local level—this can be labeled harm reduction. Kazi continues, however: “In response to the vandalism, Gap released a statement claiming that ‘Gap is a brand that celebrates inclusion and diversity,’ then featured the ad as its Twitter banner image. Many applauded this move with #ThankYouGap tweets, less concerned with the company’s unethical labor practices in Bangladesh (a predominantly Muslim country). Even after the deaths of hundreds of its workers in Bangladesh, Gap refused to sign on to a safety agreement. ‘By drawing our attention toward a single advertisement,’ writes Waleed Shahid, ‘Gap has brownwashed their own labor practices, obscuring the brown people and places from where their clothing originates.’” Shahid’s critique is important for debunking neoliberal multiculturalism, a type of multiculturalism that is satisfied by the mere presence of nonwhite faces in advertisements, film, or boardrooms” (ibid.).

¹³ Again, I am inspired by Dr. Hong’s work here. It is decolonial futures precisely because of its aspiration: “decolonization means that settler-colonizers leave and leave no trace. It means we give the land back. We are not there yet. Until we are, we take part in the decolonial futuring of theological education through anticolonial practice and commitments” (Hong, 162).

¹⁴ Junaid Akram Rana and Sohail Daulatzai, *With Stones in Our Hands: Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xx.

¹⁵ ibid., xx-xxi

In my view, critical interfaith/interreligious studies scholars and educators should awaken in their students a desire for the impossible—a decolonial future, one that is anticapitalist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive, anti-supremacist, and nonhierarchical—while instilling in them the intelligence, proficiency, and *commitment* to live justly and equitably across religious differences in their local communities and professional organizations, which are often marked by colonial, racialized hierarchies.

I opened this introduction with bell hooks because it seems like critical interfaith/interreligious educators are transgressing boundaries in two ways. The first way is on the individual and local level: providing students with the skills necessary to transgress religious boundaries in their personal and professional communities, to be the leader that provides religious and cultural awareness, inclusion, equity, and diversity in ways that affirm and celebrate difference, in ways that call in allies and accomplices to liberation and call out exclusion and hegemony. At the very least, this is harm reduction; it is better to have fewer harmful policies in the employee handbook, school district, hospital chaplaincies, and so on, fewer bigots, fewer ignorant actions. But this practical aim is complemented by the larger, more radical transgression: to “know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable,” to educate “against and beyond [the] boundaries” that produce the inequities and injustices in the first place, and to “create new visions” for the world.”¹⁶ To be free from structures that oppress and create structures that liberate. Together, we—critical interfaith/interreligious studies educators—can encourage each other, push each other not just to the limits, but beyond and against the limits to imagine an interfaith/interreligious future yet unknown.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
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¹⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.