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# *The Journal of Inter-Religious Studies*
## Issue 18, Spring 2016



My interfaith experiences during rabbinical school—foremost among them, my participation in Seminarians Interacting, the magnificent (and belated) program of NCCJ (now the National Conference for Community and Justice)—were essential to my formation as the rabbi I would become. (It is especially appropriate that "formation" is itself a concept I learned from my Christian peers.) It would take a great deal of time and space to articulate all the ways in which I have been shaped by my experiences as a Jewish seminarian and clergyperson interacting with peers and mentors from other religious traditions. But it is worth noting here at least one more influence on me: the Christian language of discernment—a faith-based vocabulary for reflecting on how one is living and where one is going, especially in times of change.

To say that one is living in a transitional period is, in some sense, simply to acknowledge that we are human, and that our individual lives and the arenas in which we operate are changing all the time. Nevertheless, some times are more transitional than others, and this is one of those times at the JIRS. This is my first issue as Editor-in-Chief. Our talented and skillful Associate Editor, Kendra Moore, is leaving in July to devote herself fully to her PhD studies at Boston University. And change is coming to the Journal not only from within but from without. Andover Newton Theological Seminary (ANTS) and Hebrew College have, since 2011, hosted and nurtured the Journal through CIRCLE, their joint center for interreligious leadership development. ANTS will

soon close its Newton campus, and is exploring affiliation with another university-based seminary outside of the Greater Boston area. And Hebrew College has just announced the establishment of the Betty Ann Greenbaum Miller Center for Interreligious Learning and Leadership, at which the Journal will be housed beginning this summer.

All of this coincides with the completion of seven years of publication of the *Journal for Inter-Religious Studies*. To come on board at this transitional juncture has so far been both a daunting and an exciting prospect. It was clear to all of us who work on the Journal that, as befits the end of a seven-year cycle, it would be both appropriate and fruitful to publish a kind of "sabbatical" issue. We invited reflection by six scholars in the field of interreligious studies on some of our previously published articles; we asked them not only to respond to the specific issues contained in each piece, but also to use it to reflect on the field as a whole. We crafted a seventh piece capturing a conversation among the members of the Journal's leadership team reflecting on the evolution of the Journal itself.

Here is that sabbatical issue—may it be the first of many! In the pages of this issue, Mohammed Abu-Nimer explores the challenge in interreligious peacebuilding of adequately accounting for power dynamics and the macro setting of dialogue, as well as the differing goals of harmonization and liberation. Nancy Fuchs Kreimer uses the possibility of "thinking about difference differently" to examine how the contested topics of hierarchy and boundaries do and might play out in contemporary Jewish thinking. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook investigates the history and range of understandings and applications of "dialogue" in interreligious engagement. Karla Suomala considers the importance of textual study in theological education as a method of interreligious encounter, even in the absence of an embodied religious other. Najeeba Syeed invites us to interrogate our definitions about religion, intersectionality, and cosmopolitanism, and to attend to the ways in which unexamined definitions and assumptions serve to suppress the voices of marginalized people and those with complex "religious" identities. Abraham Vélez de Cea proposes a new formulation of the pluralist hypothesis, one that is not necessarily consistent with John Hick's original epistemological and ontological assumptions, and that can take into account postmodern insights from a stance of deep intellectual humility.

(You will find the articles to which they are responding by clicking on the name of the original author, provided at the beginning of each piece.)

Finally, the founding editors of the Journal, Stephanie Varnon-Hughes (who just left her position last fall) and Josh Stanton, along with CIRCLE co-directors (and JIRS co-publishers) Celene Ibrahim, Jennifer Peace, and Or Rose, join me in a stocktaking conversation about the history and development of this Journal and its "growing edges."

We invite you to reflect along with us as you read these pages, and comment on these seven articles in conversation with other readers. May your own goings and comings be fruitful.

**Sue Fendrick**
**JIRS Editor-in-Chief**

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## *Harmonization versus Liberation: Basic Conditions for Effective Interreligious Peacebuilding*

## A Response by Mohammed Abu-Nimer to Ron Kronish

(original article: http://irdialogue.org/journal/issue05/“inter-religious-dialogue-as-a-method-of-peace-building-in-israel-and-palestine”-by-rabbi-dr-ronald-kronish/)

Dialogue, peace education, conflict resolution, management, settlement, and reconciliation are processes that have been utilized by practitioners and more recently by faith based organizations to promote peace in conflict areas. Interreligious peacebuilding (IRPB) practitioners apply these processes in contexts in which religious identity has been manipulated by politicians and religious leaders to justify certain policies. Thus the emerging field of IRPB should be viewed as part of a wider peace and conflict resolution field that has been developing since the late 1970s and has accumulated impressive knowledge on what makes dialogue and peacebuilding effective.

The following are some reflections on several core lessons learned from the field of peace and conflict resolution that can enhance the effectiveness of IRPB in conflict areas and assist its practitioners in preparing for genuine peace and reconciliation processes. These core lessons can be crystalized as: Power Dynamics, Symmetry, Harmonization vs. Liberation, Credibility, and Link to Action.

Ron Kronish’s piece on IRPB in Israel/Palestine mirrors some of the limitations and shortcomings of this emerging field, especially when it is implemented in a conflict context without careful examination of the macro setting and without questioning the impact of that conflict context (including asymmetrical power dynamics) on the interreligious dialogue framework, process, and expected outcomes of success.

Power Dynamics and Symmetry: IRPB, especially the dialogue process, often neglects to take into consideration the conflict reality of asymmetric power dynamics. For example, Palestinians in East Jerusalem understand and experience themselves as living under occupation and suffer abuses of their basic human rights in mobility, employment, housing, etc. Such reality ought to be recognized when IRPB models are designed and described. Recognizing the conflict reality of the participants in the dialogue requires that the IRPB organizers adjust their models and processes to reflect Kronish’s assertion that “they live in different realities.”

Harmonization versus Liberation: Humanizing the enemy is crucial but not enough. Humanizing the other is an important and essential part of peacebuilding work; nevertheless, the PB programs that stop at the “humanization gate” of individual awareness (dialogue design and implementation) might indeed end up contributing to the status quo--in this example, helping the occupier, the Israeli occupation system, both find justification for the existing reality of basic human rights abuses and justifying inaction against them. Those Palestinian and Israeli peace activists who oppose dialogue when its goal is mainly harmonization argue that such activities can end up encouraging inaction and fail to directly confront the structure of the occupation.

For example, all of the 10 categories of accomplishments listed by Kronish precisely reflect the limitation of this kind of interreligious dialogue, especially when being utilized by the dominant Israeli Jewish majority to engage the dominated Palestinian group members in a limited sensitization process that has a clear ceiling of accepting and humanizing the other. Due to the nature of the participants, organizational sponsorship, facilitators, and definition of success, the interreligious conversation and interaction process becomes primarily focused on harmonization as opposed to liberation (Abu-Nimer et. al., 2007).

Kronish's article declares that the main goal of IRPB is as follows: "The goal of peace is normalization, not separation." This statement provides an example of why IRPB and dialogue do not have a wide acceptance or credibility among Palestinians in the occupied territories and elsewhere. "Normalization" is the term used by those who oppose interacting and dialogue in all its forms with Israeli organizations and the Israeli government.[1] They accuse the dialoguers of contributing to accepting the reality of occupation and pacifying the resistance (both militant and nonviolent resistance). The use of "normalization" here is problematic, even if it is intended to refer more generally to having a "normal relationship" between Israeli and Palestinian communities under a new set of rules and different conditions (for Palestinians without occupation and for Israelis with acceptable security guarantees). It signals a lack of attention to the political context in which the dialogue is taking place and to the very particular meaning of "normalization" in that context.

Even if according to Kronish, IRPB leads to the call for joint or separate action, it is clear that the overall framework utilized for the dialogue lacks the macro contextual analysis of power dynamics. In fact, it aims to "equalize" the experience of all the participants in the IRPB model by largely focusing on the individual's suffering and reducing the relationship from collective rights to individual awareness of victimhood and humanization. The system of occupation and control that will continue to generate the root causes of the conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine and Israel winds up being absent from the model or the analysis.

This is contrary to what has been described regarding conflict transformation experiences in South Africa and Northern Ireland, where IRPB produced massive structural changes of the system of apartheid and Protestant ethnic control respectively. Without having these kinds of outcomes or objectives in the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian IRPB, it will continue to be perceived by most Palestinians and their allies as a tool for the dominant majority to mask reality and delay the theological liberation of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews from the consequences of their relationships as occupied and occupier.

This dynamic is not unique to Israel-Palestine interethnic and interreligious dialogue; research has documented similar processes in other conflict areas (see Hubbard, 2001 and Abu-Nimer, 2009). In Mindanao, Philippines, when Muslim minority members of interreligious dialogue groups asked the organizers to adjust their interreligious peacebuilding efforts to include issues related to the recognition of their historical rights over the land, self-determination, and the role of the Catholic Church in the subjugation of the indigenous people, the IRPB organizer declared that this is not the purpose of the dialogue; we need to understand each other and accept each

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[1] The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement has called for stopping all contacts with Israeli institutions, especially those linked or related to occupied territories (http://bdsmovement.net/).

other. Additionally, when Buddhist monks in Trinco Mali in northeastern Sri Lanka stood up and declared that interreligious dialogue should not be political and should avoid any discussion of the domination of the Sinhalese Buddhist culture over Muslim and Christian Tamil cultures and religion, he was adopting a model of harmonization and attempting to deprive the minority members in the dialogue group of exploring their role as liberators of their faith and their collective ethnic identity. In Egypt, Muslim imams have stated that there is no need to delve into the structural restrictions imposed on Christian Copts, de facto defining the state as Islamic, and called for an emphasis on humanizing, common values, and some cultural differences.

Credibility of IRPB and Link to Action: The credibility of IRPB in a conflict context is always linked to the type of analysis and framework that the peacebuilder uses to view the conflict and design their intervention accordingly. This is one of the most difficult challenges that limits the effectiveness of IRPB, and dialogue in general, in conflict areas. Practitioners are often asked by skeptics about the value of such programs.

I face such questions at least once a week, "As a Palestinian, you have been doing dialogue for three decades; why do you participate in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue?" Over the years, my answer has ranged over the following:

> What other options do we have?
> We have tried everything else.
> War is easy to make, but violence destroys our community.
> Dialogue is about education and deeper understanding of the other.
> Individual change is essential for structural change.

In addition to the above, I have begun looking at the IRPB as a liberation space (Abu-Nimer 2011). The liberation model of IRPB in conflicts such as the Israel-Palestine conflict includes an additional transformative component that is integrated or mainstreamed into the typical four stages of dialogue processes that Kronish outlines.[2]

The joint analysis of collective power dynamics and its implications for individuals' faith and daily life practices is crucial for the development of new awareness among the participants, one that takes into consideration the need for a different set of actions by each group depending on their own context and reality. Such analysis starts by exploring the privileges of the individual in the first stage of knowing the other as a human (what privileges do you have as individual Israeli or Palestinian?). In stage two, when participants in interreligious dialogue jointly explore their holy texts, a crucial question needs to guide their exploration: How are their asymmetric power relations moving them to understand their holy texts? What sources of theological liberation can they commonly identify in their text? In the action stage, the primary dialogical question is: What is the range of actions that your faith inspires you to take in order to eliminate all forms of oppression and injustice? What are the limits of your faith-based action in confronting the systems of domination in your society?

[2] The four stages of dialogue as described by the article were identified in early 1980s as part of a problem-solving workshop (Herb Kelman 1972; Abu-Nimer 1993; Halabi 1998; see also http://kelmaninstitute.org/). The four-stage dialogue process is a model that has been articulated and detailed in number of research and program evaluation reports (Abu-Nimer 2004).

The integration of the above questions into an IRPB dialogue process can enhance its credibility among underprivileged groups and individuals. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite strong religious identity among Muslims, Christians, and Jews, IRPB is even more marginalized and underestimated as a tool for peace and reconciliation than other secular forms and models of peace and reconciliation. The lack of credibility of such organizations among the Palestinian community is a major challenge, and as a result the majority of the activities are based on the engagement of foreign Christians and Israeli Jews (with few Muslim participants). The inability to engage many Palestinians, either Muslims or Christians, in such programs is primarily linked to the approach and ownership of such organizations (Abu-Nimer, 2007).

Since the early 1990s, the IRPB field in Israel and Palestine has been facing a crisis in sustaining partnerships between the key organizations on both sides. On many occasions, scholars and practitioners justify or explain this reality as due to the waves of violence and wars that sweep the region every few years. However, intra-organizational and inter-organizational factors such as structure and management, methodologies, and funding sources play a significant role in the lack of ability to sustain organizational partnerships and relations across national and religious divides. This is certainly an area of research that can shed further light on the potential of IRPB in Israel and Palestine as a viable venue for supporting peace and reconciliation.

The ability to sustain partnerships is crucial in determining the effectiveness of IRPB outside of Israel and Palestine, as well. Global efforts by the UN, the European Union, the United States Government, and Muslim countries support IRPB to prevent the manipulation of religious identity to justify political violence. However, a careful examination of these efforts often reveals the reality that such campaigns rely primarily on secular civil society organizations and individuals to implement their programs; as a result, faith-based organizations are not taking the lead. In addition, religious actors in these efforts tend to be mainly moderate voices and lack wider public constituencies, and their influence on the national and public agenda remains limited. The credibility of these religious organizations will be key to the success of IRPB in genuinely contributing to the culture of peace in any given society.

The various complex conditions discussed above that can enhance or diminish the effectiveness of IRPB in conflict areas should not be misunderstood as dismissing the potential importance of IRPB. On the contrary, after more than a century of violent conflict in the Israeli-Palestinian context, there is no doubt that a genuine arrangement based on peace, justice, and security cannot be achieved without a full and constructive engagement of religious constituencies.

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## *“Thinking about Difference Differently:” Boundaries of Jewish Peoplehood*
## A Response by Nancy Fuchs Kreimer to Jerusha Lamptey

(original article: http://irdialogue.org/journal/thinking-differently-about-difference-muslima-theology-and-religious-pluralism-by-jerusha-tanner-lamptey/)

In a recent class on “Religious Leadership for a Multifaith World,” I asked the students to introduce themselves by saying what was at stake for them in the topic of religious diversity. What did interfaith have to do with their lives? Convinced as I am of the importance of the topic, I still found the length of their responses amazing. One student even seemed puzzled by the question. “My parents grew up in two different religious traditions, I practice a third, my spouse and his entire family come from a fourth. I am a chaplain in a hospital where I work with colleagues and patients of every faith and none. Is there anything *but* interfaith?”

In my favorite cartoon, someone asks a fish, “How’s the water?” to which the fish responds, “What’s water?” Interfaith is the water in which many of us swim. It is becoming our natural home. Thus, the question of religious difference could not be more timely and important.

Jerusha Lamptey goes a long way toward deepening that conversation in this article (and in her pathbreaking book, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism*).[3] Lamptey’s core insight is to bring together the conversation about gender difference with one about religious plurality. She introduces readers to the work of a group of contemporary women interpreters of the Qur’an regarding sexual difference, and shows how this scholarship can be a resource for a rethinking of difference in general, and religious difference in particular. In doing so, she helps us to—in her words—“think about difference differently!”

Lamptey insists on reminding us of the connection between theology and the practical issues of how we live. As I hope to show, these theoretical issues of hierarchy and boundaries have real life implications for Jews. Not only do they connect to some of the most hotly debated topics in the Jewish world today, they also carry implications for how we understand the why and how of interreligious engagement. For Lamptey, academic questions are also questions that matter to our communities—or should. It is one of her insights that I especially appreciate.

In this response, I will explore two of the key themes that emerge from Lamptey’s work. The first concerns the issue of hierarchy, and the second that of boundaries. I will suggest that in the early work of Judith Plaskow, the first Jewish feminist to call herself a theologian, one finds insights about hierarchy (both gender and religious) that run parallel to those of Lamptey’s scholars.[4] Comparing Lamptey’s work with Plaskow’s helps us to lift up the distinct way in which this issue emerges in the Jewish context in contrast with the Islamic.

That discussion will lead us into the second theme, that of clear and static boundaries that are understood to unambiguously divide humanity. Lamptey’s exploration of the limitations of thinking about religious boundaries pushes us to deepen a discourse that is already emerging on

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[3] (New York: Oxford, 2014).

[4] In Lamptey’s book, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Plaskow’s work is cited and discussed, along with that of other feminist theologians who deal with this issue. See p. 105.

the edges of the Jewish world. Here, I turn to the recent work of Shaul Magid and Noam Pianko, two scholars who are reimagining Jewish peoplehood. I suggest that they are pointing us to new territory that Lamptey's thinking can help us to navigate.

I will begin by laying out the problem of religious difference as it presents itself in Jewish tradition. Briefly (and much too simply) Judaism, like Islam, presents us with—in Lamptey's words—a "tangle," although in quite a different way. On one hand, Jewish tradition holds that God created all humanity from the same two parents and that all human beings carry the image of God. Furthermore, our texts do not claim to have the whole truth to which all others must assent if they are to be saved. Judaism is not, in Paul Knitter's terms, an exclusivist tradition. Indeed, it acknowledges that others also have truths and access to God.

On the other hand, Jewish tradition makes a clear distinction between the Jewish people and "the nations." Some strands of Jewish tradition press this theme of privilege—of ontological essence—more than others, but even secular Judaism has a version of the chosen people trope in certain chauvinistic concepts of Jewish peoplehood. Unlike Islamic tradition as described by Lamptey, where hierarchical evaluation is reserved for individuals and group difference is divinely willed and lateral, Jewish tradition tends to locate hierarchical difference precisely in group membership.

Consider the traditional blessings said at the end of the Sabbath. We praise God for distinguishing between the holy and the ordinary, light and darkness, the Jewish people and other nations, and the Sabbath and the other six days of the week. While the world is made up of the ordinary as well as the holy, darkness as well as light, the nations as well as the Jews, and workdays as well as the Sabbath, we hear in this blessing the honor and esteem in which the holy, light, and the Sabbath are held, as well the Jews. This prayer thanks God for making those distinctions. In the morning blessings, we explicitly thank God for making us Jews (or in the traditional formulation, for not having made us non-Jews); in Orthodox Judaism, Jewish men thank God for not having made them women (a parallel that will become relevant when we look at Plaskow's thinking).

As with Lamptey's Muslim women writers, Plaskow's thinking about sexual difference offers an important connection to the rethinking of religious difference—an intersection that Plaskow herself notes. In *Standing Again at Sinai*, Plaskow takes on the gender binary dividing male from female in Jewish tradition, and the costs of that "habit of thought." She sees in binaries a necessary hierarchy with all the spiritual injury that entails. Plaskow argues that this is problematic not only for women; it carries over to the "subordination of sexual minorities, non-Jews and other groups." She suggests a different approach to difference, both with regards to gender and for Jews and others, one that Lamptey might call "lateral."

Plaskow suggests replacing chosenness as a model for Jewish self-understanding with a "less dramatic" term, "distinctness." As she puts it, distinctness suggests that the relationship between various communities, such as Jewish and non-Jewish, "should be understood not in terms of hierarchical differentiation but in terms of part and whole."[5] She argues that one can value particularity better through "the distinctiveness that opens itself to difference." Thus, a feminist

[5] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 105.

rethinking of gender can have implications for how we understand ourselves as Jews in a world of religious diversity.

A word about hermeneutics: Plaskow does not claim to have found this approach within Judaism. On the contrary, she acknowledges that the hierarchical way of handling difference is "deeply woven into the fabric of (our) texts and traditions." Plaskow owns her authority (never separate from her community) to move beyond the textual tradition. In this way, she is operating with different hermeneutical assumptions than Lamptey—and the women upon whose work she relies—who recognize and honor the ontological status of the Qur'an in the Muslim tradition. As Plaskow puts it:

> I see Judaism as a huge, often unwieldy and contradictory bundle of texts, traditions, laws, practices, folkways and so on that constitute the past and establish the foundations for the future of the Jewish people…Jewish communities can sort, reconfigure, and add elements to the bundle that makes up Judaism, drawing on those parts that best serve our needs. The core of tradition is not a given but a subject of fierce and ever-renewed debate.[6]

Once establishing that the Jewish/non-Jewish boundary can be articulated in a way that describes difference but not hierarchy, we turn to the next question Lamptey raises: How closely bounded are the entities of which we speak? Lamptey critiques a conception of religious difference that is "intimately tied to clear and static boundaries. " She argues that it "leads to an excessive focus on the boundaries themselves and on the process of identifying that which demarcates a boundary." This theme, too, presents challenges for Jewish understandings of the "other."

Plaskow is not unaware of that issue as well. She reminds us that a Jewish community that "marshals strength at its boundaries" can often do so "at the detriment of the center." But Lamptey pushes us further. The boundary becomes important as a way of dividing insiders and outsiders. Problematically, the marker "is depicted as clear, static, and unambiguously defined." For Muslims, the boundary is defined by belief. In the case of Judaism, it is in defining who is a Jew—who is "us" and who is the "other." But the question Lamptey raises is the same for Jews: How closely do we police the boundaries and insist on static lines of distinction?

As Daniel Boyarin argues in *Borderlines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity*, in the first centuries of the Common Era, the fuzziness of existing borders was intentionally eradicated, creating clear boundaries between Judaism and Christianity that henceforth would be rigorously enforced. He speaks of "fetishizing borders and boundaries," and the depiction of religions as "separate, hermetically sealed compartments." Building upon Boyarin, Lamptey writes: "Such rigid and static compartments do serve a cognitive function, but they are also a gross simplification of religious identity and interaction. They present religions fully purged of all fuzziness, complexity, and hybridity."[7]

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[6] Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith," *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook*, eds. Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 18.
[7] Lamptey, *Never Wholly Other*, 72. The quotations from Boyarin are in Lamptey's text.

I live and work in the segment of the Jewish world that is most in touch with some of the radical changes going on in our society, changes that are impacting Jews and Judaism and how we define ourselves in relation to the "other." These include: post-ethnicity; the emphasis on voluntary affiliations (assent) rather than inherited ones (descent); dual and multiple religious belonging; people changing religions in the course of a lifetime; and, finally, intermarriage as a demographic reality. For better or for worse, we are living into that future and trying to figure out how to respond.

Liberal Jewish communities today are made of people with two, one or no Jewish parents; people who have converted to Judaism; and people who simply are joining in some aspect of Jewish living, fellow travelers for parts of the journey. The Jewish people are no longer a tightly bounded entity, and certainly not an essentialist, static one. As Shaul Magid puts it, "The multiethnic and multiracial nature of the American Jewish family can and already has redrawn certain boundaries related to practice, belief, identity."[8]

If feminists have helped us understand the constructed nature of sexual distinctions, and softened some of the boundaries within Judaism in practical ways (for example, women wearing men's prayer garb, or serving as rabbis), what could a similar approach to the boundaries between Jews and others mean?

Noam Pianko points out that what Magid describes above can be seen as an extension of the insights of Plaskow and others. As he explains in *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation,* scholarship in the last three decades—including and under the influence of feminist scholarship—has replaced "static boundaries, essential characteristics, and shared histories" with "understandings and expressions of porous borders, fluid identities, and constructed histories."[9]

In light of these changes, Pianko suggests we think more about the "what" of Jewish life than the "who," and suggests—helpfully I believe—that alongside the "Jewish people" we focus on the "Jewish project." He asks, "What are the …boundaries for a group defined by individuals engaging in various ways in the Jewish enterprise?"[10] These are some of the questions my colleagues and I have been asking ourselves as our pews are increasing filled with "others" who want to participate in Jewish communal life. In the Jewish world at large, these conversations are very much alive and often fraught.

For example, when Shaul Magid first began drawing attention to post-ethnic trends in American Judaism, Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer issued a strong response:

> Whereas [Magid] applauds the shift to a porous, self-constructed, and voluntary ethnicity, we doubt it is "good for the Jews." We take wary cognizance of post-ethnicity and urge American Jews to contend with it, rather than surrender.[11]

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[8] Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 242.

[9] Noam Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 2562. The page numbers cited here correspond to the Kindle version of this book.

[10] Ibid., 2917-2918.

[11] Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, "What is So Great about Post-Ethnic Judaism?" *Sh'ma*, March 1, 2011.

Rachel Adler—a leading Jewish feminist theologian—offers a nuanced approach to boundary maintenance for Jewish peoplehood.[12] While Adler speaks eloquently about the rich learning that comes from cultural sharing and cross-fertilization, she also asks hard questions about boundary crossing. Adler is far from advocating separatism; indeed, she says we should cross borders to build relationships and to grow—yet she insists that the borders should be there to be crossed. If a Jew chooses to "live in the borderlands," to "transgress" the boundaries through—for example—marriage to a non-Jew, that requires honest reckoning. Adler does not share the anxious tone of those who decry every intermarriage or new demographic study as the end of the Jewish people. But she sees the need to police the marker between insider and outsider, even as we cross back and forth to learn and to grow.

From Lamptey's discussion of bounded religious entities, I gain insight into this conversation that I had not had before. I had long since agreed with Plaskow (and Mordecai Kaplan before her) that it made little sense to speak of a hierarchical relationship between Jews and other peoples. Yet I had seen the "leaky" borders of Jewish peoplehood and the blurring of distinctions as a sociological reality with which we needed to cope, not appreciating the way in which this development parallels a move to understand religious difference as more fluid.

This is not a simple issue. Indeed, for Jews, it is one fraught with fear. Monitoring our borders is tied up for us with our very survival as a people. Neither Magid nor Pianko nor I are suggesting that the Jewish people should somehow cease to exist as a defined entity. But perhaps we might want to embrace with less handwringing the reality that the Jewish community is less bounded and more permeable than before. What Lamptey helps me to appreciate is that the flux we are experiencing—the shifting of definitions of who is inside and who is out—is part of a different way of thinking about difference, one that acknowledges identity as multifaceted and dynamic, thereby inevitably changing the nature of groups and the borders between them. We can double down on policing at the edges, or we can begin to explore new opportunities both in our Jewish settings and in the interfaith encounter.

Which brings us back to my opening reflection: interfaith is the water in which we swim. What are the implications of this discussion for interreligious encounter? Lamptey argues convincingly that how we understand religious difference will impact what we consider to be appropriate forms of interreligious interaction. How does "thinking about difference differently" open new possibilities for finding value in the encounter with other faiths?

As the discourse within the Jewish world shifts, so will our understanding of other religious communities and the reasons to engage with them. As our Jewish questions change from "Are we the chosen people?" to "Who constitutes the 'we'?" and from "Can rabbis perform intermarriages?" to "What is the role of non-Jewish family members in our communities?" so, too, does the what and why of dialogue.

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[12] Rachel Adler, "To Live Outside the Law You Must be Honest," *The Reconstructionist*, Spring, 2004, https://www.rrc.edu/sites/default/files/legacy/reconstructionist/Spring2004.pdf. In a private conversation with Adler (February, 2016), she confirmed that her views have not significantly diverged since then.

Will Herberg's classic *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* depicts interfaith engagement in mid- twentieth century as "the triple melting pot," where each religious community came to the table as a clearly defined, bounded entity. In the decades after World War II, Jews and Christians unpacked their troubled history and made great strides in building supportive relationships between their groups. Since then, important work by historians and theologians has advanced our understanding of each other while, on the ground, Jews and Christians—joined more recently by Muslims, Buddhists and many others—have built coalitions to create a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

The addition of groups to the ever-expanding multifaith "Noah's Ark" is only the beginning. More importantly, it is no longer clear (especially to the next generation) that we encounter one another *as groups*. Rather, as the boundaries of our communities become more fluid, people define themselves less through solidarity with particular religions and more as individuals with complex, often multiple sources of identity. Thus, interfaith engagement becomes an opportunity for seekers and practitioners to share spiritual teaching with one another. What has each of us learned from the wisdom traditions in which we are located? How can we help each other navigate the challenges of cultivating character and building compassionate communities? These conversations will not replace the necessary dialogues between groups. But they will enrich the already robust social change work engaged in together by people of faith.

Let me close with a postscript: gratitude, and a plea. I am deeply appreciative of Lamptey for her contribution and all the rich thinking it will provoke and inspire. In this piece, I have only scratched the surface of Lamptey's complex and nuanced arguments. Hence, my plea: Read her book! And learn more, too, about Lamptey's new venture, a program on Islam, Social Justice and Interreligious Engagement at Union Theological Seminary. We are all blessed by her model of a scholar/activist who asks profound questions and takes her answers back to the world and its problems.

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## *The Meanings of Dialogue in Interreligious Teaching and Learning Today*
## A Response by Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook to Elena Dini

(original article: http://irdialogue.org/journal/processing-experiences-within-an-academic-framework-a-challenge-for-interfaith-education-by-elena-dini/)

Elena Dini's article, "Processing Experiences within an Academic Framework: A Challenge for Interfaith Education," speaks to the importance of dialogue within the overall framework of interreligious education,[13] especially in educational institutions such as seminaries and universities. The article speaks to the different models and philosophies utilized in schools today, provides a snapshot of the evolving role of interreligious dialogue in academia, and argues the importance of the ongoing development of the field. My reflection here will widen the focus onto the larger field of research and writing on interreligious learning, and briefly discuss the work of a number of the scholars within it.

Interreligious learning is a growing field of scholarly inquiry and pedagogical practice with the aim of helping all students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to interact, understand, and communicate with persons from diverse religious traditions; to function effectively in the midst of religious pluralism; and to create pluralistic democratic communities that work for the common good. In interreligious education, dialogue is as much about listening as it is about speaking. Learners must be religiously literate and capable of forming relationships with individuals, families, and communities in order to create environments that are supportive of multiple religious traditions, a variety of life experiences, and democratic action. As a process, it should be grounded in the spiritual journeys of individuals and groups, and connected to a vision for humankind to love one another as neighbors. Interreligious dialogue—a component part of interreligious learning—like other transformational experiences, occurs within groups. While this does not exclude the need for individual interreligious learning and reflection, these experiences alone do not replace the importance of genuine dialogue generated through forming relationships across religious traditions.

The questions Dini asks in her article are at the core of the history of the field of interreligious learning, as well as its ongoing development: "What can be taught to these people and how?" "How do we frame in academic terms what happens in those situations?" and "How is it then possible for the instructor to facilitate this process?"

In her article, Dini utilizes a key source in the field: *Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue* by David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell (2009). The need to integrate interreligious learning into theological education in order to prepare leaders for a religiously pluralistic world is the focus of a number of initiatives. This study moves the religious literacy of seminary graduates beyond Christianity, although that need is affirmed, to addressing ways theological schools address and structure interreligious engagement within the context of their curricula. Through case studies and sample syllabi, Roozen and Hadsell create "a

[13] While some authors use the terms "interfaith" and "interreligious" interchangeably, and while the former is the more popular term, in my work the default is to use "interreligious," because some religious groups do not consider themselves a "faith" tradition.

practical literature and related conversation among theological educators on the role of the practice of interfaith dialogue in the seminary curriculum."[14]

My own recent study of interreligious learning, *God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities* (2014), goes beyond theological schools by taking a look at the roots of interreligious dialogue in Christian contexts, and then it addresses the pedagogical frameworks for dialogue found in academia, congregations, and religious organizations. The recent 50th anniversary of Vatican II is a reminder of the importance of the Council in opening the door to the possibilities of deeper learning between religious traditions through dialogue. Shortly after the Council, there was a burst of educational activity and publications from Christian organizations and denominations interested in pursuing interreligious dialogue. In these early years, a spirit of enthusiasm carried the day, and at times the need to develop intentional processes and language for encounter between religions was neglected. Some of those most engaged in interreligious dialogue in the early years were criticized for losing touch with their own faith communities; others maintained a more conservative reaction to the quick pace of changing attitudes toward other religious traditions. In the same era, the rise in fundamentalism across religious traditions also contributed to an attitude that positive religious pluralism and lasting peace were unrealistic dreams.[15]

Despite these challenges, the field of interreligious dialogue has expanded over the past 60 years. It should be noted here that the term "dialogue" originated and is most often used in Christian circles, though it sometimes is adopted by members of other religious traditions. In some cases "interreligious dialogue" is used synonymously with "interreligious learning." In other cases, interreligious dialogue refers to specific processes designed for interreligious encounters, including dialogues between experts, interpersonal dialogues between persons of different religious traditions, and community dialogues that are linked to social engagement and peace-building initiatives.

The wide range of understandings of interreligious learning continues to expand today, including the dialogue tradition as well as a variety of approaches and methodologies to support and enrich encounters between different religious traditions. Rooted in the tradition of Vatican II, Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, publishes widely and is credited by many with developing the philosophy and pedagogy of interreligious thought and practice over the last 60 years. Swidler's recent book, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions* (2014), is the culmination of his study of "the cosmic dance of dialogue," a new way of life that encourages critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and authentic cooperation.

No critical exploration of interreligious learning would be complete without mention of the groundbreaking work of religious educator Mary C. Boys, now at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Boys' work in interreligious education is foundational, particularly in relation to encounters between Jews and Christians. In one of her several books, *Christians & Jews in*

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[14] David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell, *Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue* (Hartford: Hartford Seminary, 2009), 129.
[15] G. Evers, "Trends and Development in Interreligious Dialogue," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* (22:2), 228-229.

*Dialogue: Learning in the Presence of the Other* (2006)*,* Boys and Jewish educator Sara S. Lee, director emerita of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education and adjunct professor emerita of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, weave together interreligious teaching and learning from the perspectives of both Judaism and Christianity. Through personal stories, case studies, and observations tested through years of personal teaching experience, Boys and Lee make the connection between interreligious learning and the need to heal religious divisions by bringing people together to talk through difficult subjects such as religious identity, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel. Boys and Lee's theory of interreligious learning includes an emphasis on 1) "study in the presence of the other;" 2) intentionally connected content and process; 3) a hospitable environment which enables learners to cross religious boundaries; and 4) the need to "get inside" the religious tradition of another.[16]

The relational skills needed for meaningful dialogue in Abrahamic contexts is the focus of the book, *What Do We Want the Other to Teach About Us?* (2006), edited by David L. Coppola of the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. In it, the authors encourage dialogue as a process that first views "the other" in relationship with God before tackling the more abstract elements of religious belief. Coppola's book is a collection of essays on Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue written by experienced scholars and activists and geared for religious educators in local synagogues, churches, and mosques. "Dialogue and education are tools for each to approach the other as people in relationship with God first, and not as objects spouting abstract beliefs."[17]

In a similar vein, dialogical Jewish-Christian "conversations" as a means for greater interreligious understanding is the focus of the work of Joseph D. Small and Gilbert S. Rosenthal's edited volume of essays on covenantal partnership, *Let Us Reason Together: Christians and Jews in Conversation,* sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the National Council of Synagogues (2010). This book is one of the most deeply relational of the denominational works available. The book is offered as a model to local communities to encourage similar conversations that include controversial topics such as the State of Israel, conversion and proselytizing, and intermarriage.

The use of dialogue as a process to form relationships across religious differences is also found in literature on Christian-Muslim and Christian-Buddhist relationships. The literature on Muslim interreligious engagement continues to grow. For example, Jane Idelman Smith, professor of Islamic Studies at Harvard University and Hartford Seminary, writes on the history, practice, and challenges of current Muslim-Christian dialogues, in *Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (2007). Released in the same year, "A Common Word Between Us and You," a letter from 138 Muslim leaders worldwide sent to the leaders of major Christian denominations, and the Christian response, "Loving God and Neighbor Together," affirmed both the differences between the two traditions, as well as their shared commitment to love God and to love our neighbors. The published letters and responses in *A Common Word* are one example of the emergent dialogue between the two traditions (2010). In a similar way, interreligious

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[16] Mary C. Boys and Sara Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue. Learning in the Presence of the Other* (Burlington: Skylight Paths, 2006), 95.
[17] David L. Coppola, *What Do We Want the Other to Teach About Us? Jewish, Christian and Muslim Dialogues* (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2006), xv.

engagement between Christians and the dharma traditions is also growing in interest. Professor Paul Ingram of Pacific Lutheran University studied the process of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, mapping out the conceptual, socially-engaged, and interior dimensions of each tradition.
The idea that interreligious learning is rooted in hospitality and welcome is central to the approach of several scholars. The importance of hospitality, as seen through the biblical text, is a framework for interreligious learning often used by evangelical Christian contributors to the field. For example, Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong, an important evangelical voice in interfaith relationships, explores scripture, the practices of Jesus, and the early church to conclude that adherents of other religions are not objects for conversion, but rather a religious neighbor to whom hospitality must be extended and received, in his *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (2008). Through a pneumatological framework, Yong argues that if hospitality plays a central role in the Christian theology of other religions today, then the result is not only a set of ideas but a correlative set of practices. "Christian mission in a post-modern, pluralistic, and post-9/11 world is constituted by evangelism, social witness, and interreligious dialogue and that evangelism and proclamation always involve social engagements and interreligious dialogues of various kinds," he writes.[18]

English Jesuit Michael Barnes, in *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (2012), argues for the importance of interreligious hospitality, along with an emphasis on difference *and* particularity in the search for meaning. Barnes' philosophical approach describes three shifts or "movements" that occur in relationship with the other. The first, "meetings," attempts to situate interreligious encounter within the context of theology and history. Here he offers the image of religious traditions as "schools of faith" where teachers and learners can meet and ask questions about beliefs, actions, prayers, and rituals with integrity. The second movement, "crossings," emphasizes the need for people to be able to translate across cultural boundaries if they are to learn the skills necessary for dialogue. "Imaginings," the third movement, concerns the return back across the threshold of engagement to reflect on the ways that faith is enhanced through both interreligious learning and the need to imagine an alternative future. Barnes' movements are not intended as fixed stages, but rather as a way of reflecting on the elements of the spirituality of interreligious dialogue. "More important than any such logic is the conviction which guides me throughout that, while Christian faith and the beliefs and practices of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists may be saying different things, the very attempt to grapple with difference in a spirit of generous respect can be mutually supportive and illuminating."[19]

The connections between peace-building and interreligious dialogue and learning made by Amos Yong are echoed in the work of educators and activists from across religious traditions. Here the focus is on building relationships across religious boundaries in an effort to gain greater understanding, and to foster reconciliation. In an earlier work by David R. Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peace-Building* (2000), the author takes up the question of the relationship of religion to peace-building, and then offers principles in support of dialogue processes. More recently, *Peace-Building By, Between and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians* (2009),

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[18] Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2008), 129.
[19] Michael Barnes in *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xiii-xiv.

edited by Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David Augsburger, is a compilation of articles by Christians and Muslims on topics related to interreligious peace-building, such as religious identity, religious conversion and apostasy, interreligious dialogue, conflict transformation, and human rights.

Interreligious learning for young people is also a growing field, although faith communities in the United States have fewer resources in this area to draw on than do those in regions such as the United Kingdom and some European countries, where religion is taught as an academic subject in schools. However, the connections between young people's interest in learning more about other religions and forming friendships is a central theme in current interreligious youth programming. Eboo Patel, director of the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), and IFYC's research director Patrice Brodeur studied a wide range of international initiatives and projects of the "first interfaith generation" in their book, *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action* (2006). In addition to building a knowledge base for interreligious youth work, their work is intended to contribute to the global interfaith youth movement. "One of the goals of this movement," they write, "is to empower each other to pioneer new and cooperative learning paths at the same time as we make room for critical self-reflection through which scholarship can be produced as another tool for empowerment."[20]

A recent work that offers a much needed synopsis of the many different approaches to interreligious dialogue in international organizations within the past 30-50 years is by interreligious scholar Douglas Pratt, from the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and the University of Bern, Switzerland, *Being Faithful Being Open: The Journey of Interreligious Dialogue* (2014), and was explicitly written with the intent of expanding the "praxis" of dialogue in the future.

Lastly, one of the most creative new books that engages a full spectrum of the possibilities and challenges of interreligious learning is *Interreligious Learning and Teaching: A Christian Rationale for a Transformative Praxis* by Kristin Johnson Largen, Mary E. Hess, and Christy Lohr Sapp (2014). In a sense, these authors offer the next steps in more intentional interreligious pedagogies, including the dialogue tradition, and place them within the tradition of student teaching and learning. The book itself is ingeniously designed as a dialogue between the three authors, all of whom are experienced interreligious educators.

As the field of interreligious learning continues to grow, more research on interreligious learning for all ages needs to be done within and across religious traditions, particularly on those approaches that develop religious literacy along with dialogue skills across social identities. To be sure, the contours and the articulation of interreligious learning vary across traditions. But at same time, we know different traditions can share in interreligious learning that is based in personal narratives, religious literacy, sharing sacred spaces, compassionate action, and initiating intentional interreligious learning communities.

A number of contemporary trends and challenges present other opportunities for research, thinking, and writing within the field. The growth in many regions in the creation of

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[20] Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur, *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 1, 6-7.

interreligious sacred spaces engenders the need for more reflection on the ways we can pray together in our particularity, and at the same time avoid the misappropriation of the practices of other faith traditions. The intersection of interreligious learning and online learning pushes the borders of our delivery systems for all religious education. Considering how to build bridges with interreligious families and as well with those who claim multiple religious identities are two practical needs related to growing religious pluralism, as is the need for more research on the impact of race and religion in local communities. Finally, religious leaders across traditions who are skilled in interreligious engagement are needed in local communities, to help build on the local level a greater vision and practice of interdependence and intergroup healing.

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## *In the Absence of the Religious Other: Interreligious Encounter through Text Study in Theological Education*
## A Response by Karla R. Suomala to Melissa Heller

(original article: http://irdialogue.org/journal/jewish-christian-encounter-through-text-an-interfaith-course-for-seminarians-by-melissa-heller/)

**A new question**

How do you integrate interfaith learning and experience into theological education in a meaningful, transformative way? This question, believe it or not, is fairly new. Twenty years ago, even fifteen, it was a question few seminaries were seriously asking. Many offered a course or two in religions other than Christianity, but they were almost always electives. The situation today, however, is radically different. Some scholars and observers point to September 2001, as the turning point, after which it was no longer possible to ignore America's growing religious diversity.

In a relatively short time, within a system not known for rapid change, interreligious education has moved from being a good idea to a requirement for accreditation at seminaries and divinity schools in the United States and Canada. In 2012, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) approved the following stipulation for all Master of Divinity programs:

> A.2.3.2 MDiv education shall engage students with the global character of the church as well as ministry in the multifaith and multicultural context of contemporary society. This should include attention to the wide diversity of religious traditions present in potential ministry settings, as well as expressions of social justice and respect congruent with the institution's mission and purpose (ATS, 3).

This is in part due to the recognition on the part of ATS and its member schools that interreligious learning is critical to theological education in the 21st century.

Melissa Heller's article, "Jewish-Christian Encounter Through Text: an Interfaith Course for Seminarians," is an example of a course that exceeds ATS expectations in both its depth and scope of learning. The remarkable cooperation between three different seminaries—mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish—in the Philadelphia area contribute to the distinctiveness of this course. The sustained and focused learning experience that Heller describes moves students beyond suspicion or rudimentary knowledge of a distant "other" to the possibility of being in relationship with each other. This is ultimately the goal for those of us committed to interreligious education, and who realize that relationship is often the most powerful impetus to real learning. In cases like this, relationship can inspire curiosity and provide the framework in which religious learning is no longer done in the abstract, but occurs "on the ground" where deeper understanding and transformation can take place.

**Holy envy**

With this being said, I have to admit to feeling "holy envy" as I read Heller's article. I suspect that there are many professors and teachers who, like me, would love to offer courses on this model but simply cannot. The asymmetry of religious traditions represented in a given area or region make it impossible. According to a recent study by Pew Research Center, Christians still form a large majority in the United States—roughly 70% identify with some flavor of Christianity (2015). Those belonging to non-Christian traditions are increasing rapidly, but still make up only 5.9% of the population. That means that even where there is significant religious diversity, there are always many more Christians than Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus (or others) available to enter into interreligious conversation or partnership.

At Luther College where I teach, the student body (along with the general population in the area) is significantly more Christian (at least by context and culture, if not by commitment) and much less religiously diverse than the national picture. Located in the rolling hills of northeast Iowa, most of the religious diversity on this undergraduate liberal arts campus comes from the international student population, which is relatively small. In addition, during my 14 years at Luther, I've discovered that students (coming primarily from the Midwest and often from small towns) usually don't have significant previous interreligious experience--most don't have friends or acquaintances from non-Christian traditions, and a surprising number have never met or talked to people outside their own traditions.

Living in a city doesn't ameliorate the situation entirely, though. Those who teach in more diverse settings still have real and significant challenges when designing and offering inter-religious courses and programming. While numbers alone don't determine the quality of the interreligious experience, they are indicative of the less visible issues of perception and power. At a basic level, Christians, through their own lived experience in this culture, enter into interreligious encounters well aware of the great diversity within their own tradition. Due to their majority status, they often fail to understand or even note the great diversity within the tradition of the other, often viewing it as monolithic. This demands the impossible from those in the religious minority: to single-handedly represent their traditions and the people belonging to them.

The cultural location of interreligious encounters in North America also has significant implications for the power dynamics between majority and minority traditions. Considering interreligious learning in light of post-colonial and feminist theories and approaches, Riitaoja and Dervin have recently argued that, where this kind of inter-religious asymmetry exists (as in other situations of asymmetry),

> The Other who is seated at the negotiation table is…the *representation* of an Other constructed by the [majority] actors. The figure of the Other is their own reflection. The Other cannot speak because her voice is not heard (Spivak 1988). She can "speak" and make her "choice" only within the logic and under the conditions predetermined by the 'locals' (Riitaoja & Dervin, 3).

They go on to suggest that "the presence of the majority in the space excludes other ways of being" and that "dialogue can actually be harmful for those who are constructed as Others"

(Riitaoja & Dervin, 7). These are statements that we need to consider more fully in future research.

In the face of these conditions, Heller is quite right in pointing to the importance of Jewish students being able to act as hosts—in terms of location and setting—to their Christian guests. Putting Jewish and Christian students on more equal footing with each other opens up the possibility that both groups might be able to speak and be heard on their own terms. Within the larger Christian culture, the interreligious experience she describes changes (if even briefly) the power dynamic and gives all of the students who are not accustomed to this reversal in roles an opportunity to see themselves and their relationship to the religious other from a new perspective.

**It's all about the text**

I don't want to underestimate the challenges of designing and offering meaningful inter-religious learning experiences in settings of limited religious diversity. For students, the barriers between "us" and "them" are high, and the incentive to imagine a "we" isn't as strong in the absence of real human faces and stories which would be much harder to ignore. In addition, students may jump to conclusions or overestimate what they know about a religious tradition and its adherents when there is no peer corrective in the classroom. There is also the potential to be far less sensitive to nuance since the religious traditions and its adherents are considered in the abstract. That being said, I still believe (really) that it is possible to challenge these tendencies and to put a little flesh on the abstract.

I've found--very much like Heller--that the study of sacred text is key to building bridges between traditions, particularly between Christians and Jews. Much of my teaching load consists of courses in Hebrew Bible and Judaism. In both of these courses, I introduce students to rabbinical reading and interpretive strategies through the reading of *Midrash* (rabbinic interpretation) alongside the biblical text, and reflect on how the rabbis understood their role in relation to both text and to G-d. I've found that the pairing of the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) in Genesis 22 and the rabbinic rendering of this passage in Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu works well as a starting point (Berman, 41-49). Then, having the students form pairs (hevruta-style, as in many Jewish "houses of study") and providing a sampling of biblical texts, I ask them to "practice" the rabbinic enterprise of identifying gaps through close reading. I encourage them to proceed slowly, focusing on words and phrases, asking as many questions as they can think of along the way. Over a two- or three-week period, part of each class is devoted to this kind of *hevruta* study, with the students remaining in the same pairs.

In my Judaism course, students bring this exercise full circle and students are required to write their own *midrashim* based on biblical passages they have selected and "workshopped" in *hevruta*. The students in my classes are not trying to imitate the ancient rabbis in style or focus, which requires mastery of the Hebrew language and its grammar, among other things. Instead, I invite students to think rabbinically when they read the biblical text as a way to develop their own modern *midrashim.* I provide examples of this genre and outline a process that helps them get started. This involves paying special attention to both what is there—e.g. unusual words, the meanings of names and places, the settings in which the stories take place and what is not there—e.g. back stories, sensory detail, and the emotions and motivations of characters. The

article “White Fire: The Art of Writing Midrash” by poet and author Alicia Ostriker is one resource that has proved very helpful in this regard. Great examples of what Ostriker describes are increasingly available and also very useful in showing students what a *midrash* might look like. See, for example, Michal Lemberger’s recently published *After Abel and Other Stories* for *midrash*-like stories focusing on the perspectives of biblical women.

**Student outcomes**

Though my students are generally in pairs that share the Christian tradition, I am intrigued to realize that studying texts *hevruta*-style elicits reactions and responses very much like those of the seminarians in the article. Students in both my setting and Heller’s note the awkwardness and uncertainty they feel as they enter into conversation with their partners. My students routinely indicate that part of their anxiety comes from not wanting to offend or be put on the defensive by their *hevruta* partners; they don’t want to be the first to make a statement or voice an opinion, not knowing where their partner is on the spectrum from conservative to liberal. This seemed to be a concern for the students in Heller’s course as well, although she also notes that some mainline Protestant and Jewish pairs had difficulty finding areas of disagreement. Interestingly, this usually has very little to do with their particular tradition and much more to do with what segment of that tradition the student identifies with.

An additional reason my students give for their initial uneasiness with each other and the exercise generally is that they aren’t used to talking out loud (with anyone, but particularly someone they don’t know) about what they consider “religious stuff.” They are afraid that they don’t have the knowledge base or vocabulary to do it very well. The idea that religion can be a topic of discussion in an academic setting (as opposed to a family or devotional setting) is an alien one, because they are convinced that religion is private and individual. Coming primarily from public schools, talking about religion is something my students have never done in a classroom setting. This exercise gives them an opportunity to talk about religious texts and ideas in a more neutral setting with people they don’t know well, developing confidence in and knowledge about their own perspectives while increasingly being able to both learn from and respectfully challenge their partners (with whom they don’t always agree). While not necessarily developed in the presence of a religious other, the skills they gain are critical to being able to engage religious others when the opportunity arises.

Finally, a response that many of my students and some of the Christian students in Heller’s course share is the initial discomfort with asking questions of sacred text. One PTS student summed it up well:

> As Christians most of us do not argue with a text very well, let alone find fault with one. If I have come to appreciate anything about the Jewish relationship to the biblical text, it is the willingness to hold it as a dialogue partner and at the same time, very holy (Heller, 37).

The students in my classes who have echoed this statement go on to point out how liberating the rabbinic reading strategy is for them. For all of my students, and especially those who write modern midrashim and engage the process of thinking rabbinically even more deeply, asking questions and filling gaps allows them to see (what they had previously considered) their own

sacred text in an entirely different light. Reading selections of their own midrashim in groups of peers gives students a tangible connection to a completely new world, based not simply on *what* they know about Jews and Judaism but *how* they know and experience the tradition. In the process, their own religious experience is enriched, and they often discover curiosity about and openness to the people and sacred texts of other religious traditions.

There is still much to be done in the development of effective interreligious pedagogy when teaching in the "presence of a few," or even in the complete "absence of the religious other." However, as I hope I have demonstrated here, I think it is possible, important, and more significantly, fruitful to provide students with opportunities to develop knowledge about and even appreciation for religious others and their traditions, even when those others are hardly or not at all present in the flesh. Hopefully, what we do will inspire them to seek out relationships with religious others, both in and beyond the contexts in which they find themselves. Certainly those of us who do this kind of teaching should push ourselves to consider how our pedagogy might maximize the likelihood that our students will do that seeking, and that it will result in constructive interreligious encounters and relationships.

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## *Intersectionalities and Cosmopolitanisms in Interreligious Studies*
## A Response by Najeeba Syeed to Jeannine Hill Fletcher

(original article: http://irdialogue.org/journal/constructing-religious-identity-in-a-cosmopolitan-world-the-theo-politics-of-interfaith-work-by-jeannine-hill-fletcher/)

Jeannine Hill Fletcher presents us with a challenge that has a long genealogy in the formation of Christian theology. She cites works from scholars who undress existing and historical Christian thought to unveil the racist formations of hegemonic white authority; she also uses these works to separate out an inquiry into a feminist and gendered analysis of theological enterprises, and into how bodies are allowed, encouraged, or sanctioned to be agents in those discursive spaces.

While these concerns have long been present in Christian theological debates within the US, we are just beginning to witness a cross over into the interreligious studies field. Scholars like Jerusha Lamptey have looked through the lens of gender at theologies of religious pluralism. However, scholarship on gender in the construction of emerging "interreligious" programs, departments, and literature is still in its infancy stage.

The divergent strains of a political reading of interreligious scholarship and the normative goals of many interreligious curricula are producing a range of starting points and end goals as this emerging field develops. One might categorize interreligious education emanating from at least two epistemic commitments. The first constitutes an approach to interreligious engagement that seeks to promote interfaith harmony and citizen-participants who adhere to a common understanding of civil religion. Another set of scholars and practitioners construct religion as a modality that interacts with culture; they would emphasize the role of religious identity in concert with other intersectional, communal identities. Hill Fletcher's critical engagement is along these latter lines, and is an important shot in the arm to help this approach become seen as a legitimate approach to interreligious studies.

As Hill Fletcher points out, the goal of interfaith dialogue and studies is the creation of an "interfaith community." Interreligious education was born in an ecosystem of confessional origin that promoted particular sets of beliefs. Hill Fletcher helps us to understand another normative outcome, in addition to the theological aspects of interreligious education: the creation of community itself, one that is both an overarching goal for the field as well as a potential limiting contour for study, inquiry, practice, and scholarship in interreligious education.

While she writes eloquently about the construction of the selves as the table of dialogue, especially in their embodied emanations, I am increasingly fixated on how the construction of religion itself must be complexified. This piece sparked my thinking about the need to not just move to a breadth of intersectionalities, which Hill Fletcher would have us do, but also to analyze the depths in which the academy utilizes Christian-dominated assumptions of "religion." As Talal Asad argues in his work *Genealogies of Religion*, "…there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes."[21]

[21] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 29.

The exclusions that Asad implicitly points to, if we consider interreligious education's origin in the Christian seminary and Christian theological history (as Hill Fletcher points out), are a product of a so-called universal definition of religion that is not neutral; indeed, those exclusions may result from an operation of making-invisible that is at least in part deliberate. I would argue that while cosmopolitanism is a very useful generalizable principle for engaging contested identities, it is still a tool yet untested on the bleeding edges of interreligious studies, and one that needs to be examined for its profound and potentially insidious reification of conventional wisdoms of religion as highly organized, textual, and construed in the North American model of congregational structures. Dennis Kelley, a religious studies scholar with a research emphasis on religious practices of indigenous peoples, asks, "…whether 'belief' was ever the primary aspect of 'religion'"[22] and writes, "The old [models of]'Western' religions [as] religions of church and hierarchy are no longer tenable (if indeed they ever were), and one can see the utility of categories associated with land use, the role of nature, language, ceremony, and so on for the study of such American religious contexts as rural Christian demographic distribution or suburban Muslim women's social networking."[23] Future directions in the field of interreligious education can benefit from deconstructing the definition of "religion," not just in tracing the origin of its study and construction, but also in developing new terminologies and methods of study based on exploration of existing communities on the ground—communities that have not always been at the interfaith table, nor studied as sources of theological scholarship.

Hill Fletcher also engages cosmopolitanism as a construct and method for advancing embodied interreligious dialogue and scholarly research. One assumption of cosmopolitanism that Hill Fletcher identifies is a certain language of universality that is predicated on access to a lexicon of pluralism that operates in the public rendition of religion. If intersectionality, as she points out, is the goal of the production of our lenses for scholarly inquiry, the attendant form of cosmopolitanism must be addressed as well. We must not only construe how race and gender are variables to address; our newly formed lenses should also consider how cosmopolitanisms make assumptions regarding class as well, and what can be learned from communities who experience multiple forms of marginalization. From their lived religion experiences and knowledges, we gain insights into functional forms of cosmopolitanisms that may be obscured by classist constructions of the concept. Further exploration is called for into the ways that class both defines and undermines the notion of religion as membership-driven in particular communities, as well as how class shapes who has agency to participate in interfaith tables as currently constructed. Specifically, we might look deeper into the notion of "working class cosmopolitanism."[24]

On this topic, Pnina Werbner writes, "In my work I bring a counter-example of 'working-class cosmopolitanism' in the figure of the expanding cosmopolitan subjectivity of a Pakistani migrant worker working on a building site in the Gulf, a simple man who embraces different cultures and is a member of diverse ethnic groups, but who nevertheless retains his localized rooted identity as a Sufi.[25] Locally rooted identities may not be easily negotiated away into a larger soup of

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[22] Dennis Kelley, *Tradition, Performance, and Religion in Native America: Ancestral Ways, Modern Selves* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xiv.
[23] Ibid., xi.
[24] Pnina Werbner, "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," *Theory Culture and Society* (2006): 497.
[25] Ibid.

pluralism that creates a civil culture aimed at productive citizenship. If communities themselves are not granted citizenship, in fact denied it as undocumented workers, in many ways their religious identities are not configured in a cosmopolitan social scape. This is for two reasons: 1) If pluralism is predicated on a notion of civic engagement, the undocumented worker is legally invisible in such scenarios, unable due to status to participate publicly in interfaith engagement that is often the public performance venue created by civic or government leaders to furthering their goals of harmony between traditions. 2) Scholars have recognized the precarious position that undocumented workers hold in the religious landscape of formally organized faith communities. They have noted a politics of invisibility that holds the houses of worship often in a role that may limit the participation of undocumented workers. In a case study of 60 churches, Caroline Nagel argues that churches balance a radical theology of hospitality against the law and order discourse of the larger social ethos. To expect undocumented migrants to be "included" in formal religious communities does not recognize the barriers that they face both in religious and civic convening spaces.[26]

Another pressing question about the reality of marginalized communities is how to recognize and work with their histories of subjugated knowledges. Sharon Welch asks, "What happens when the oppressed speak for themselves? Insurrections of subjugated knowledges bring about new interpretations of Christian symbol and texts, new analyses of social structures, critiques of the institutional structure of the church, and solidarity with others."[27] Oppressed groups often have a hybridity of urgency. They function perhaps on the larger scale, recognizably within a state-sanctioned religious community, but often mix practice because of present and historical oppression. They may have had to hide their religious practices because the oppressive systems in which they operated would consider the deep community practices as problematic or challenging existing power structures. Therefore a hybridity of interior ritual and external manifestation of doctrinally-acceptable belief and behavior emerge.

Kwok Pui Lan eloquently and succinctly captures a further tension in the recognition that "not all hybridities are equal" in her book *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue*.[28] She offers a rigorous and problematized explanation of this social phenomenon and attacks the notion that hybridity is a horizontal, flat terrain of religious identity transference."[29] Interfaith tables and studies make specific assumptions about the membership cards that religious actors carry to the conversation.

We must think in many ways about how an intersectional approach to interreligious dialogue and studies disrupts the existing categories of "religion." This is a central contribution of feminist theologians to the field; as I noted during a 2015 panel presentation:

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[26] "Under the Radar: Undocumented Immigrants, Christian Faith Communities, and the Precarious Spaces of Welcome in the U.S. South," Special Issue on Migration, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104, no. 2 (2014).

[27] Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 44-45.

[28] Kwok Pui Lan, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 64.

[29] Najeeba Syeed, "The Politics of Interreligious Education," Spotlight on Theological Education: American Academy of Religion, https://www.aarweb.org/publications/spotlight-on-theological-education-march-2014-the-politics-of-interreligious-education.

> Feminism relocates categories of religion and interrogates religion as a construct reconsidering the importance of lived religion. Feminists have helped ask questions that relocate the actual spaces where religion functions outside of formal religious houses of worship, expanded the definitions of which communities are brought to the table of religious convenings. By considering gender and intersectional aspects of identity, feminists consider sources of identity beyond the merely religious allowing for a more nuanced rendition of inextricable links that may exist between religion, race, gender, ethnicity and language…"[30]

Hill Fletcher's work deftly and eruditely sets forth a research agenda for our future line of questioning and scholarly interrogation of existing concepts and categories. The complexity she calls for and the suspicion she arouses toward simplicity are clarion calls to surface and challenge the normative goals and potential self-righteousness of interreligious studies. My recommendation is to not stop here, but to see how interreligious dialogue actually illuminates, connects to, and opens the door to a critical approach of the existing ways theology is done.

Furthermore, interreligous studies has the potential to be a player in the discursive game of self-reflective theological and religious studies scholarship, or it can choose to remain on the sidelines as a tool of potential suppression of voices. The impact of interreligious studies that sees and conducts itself in the former mode rather than the latter—that is, if prosecuted with a continuous and continually critical and sharp scholarly pen—will, in addition, help further expose the pro-Christian bias of religious studies itself.

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[30] Najeeba Syeed, "Feminist Theology, Four Perspectives," a panel discussion hosted by Claremont School of Theology on Wednesday, September 17th, 2015: https://storify.com/CST_News/feminist-theology-four-perspectives.

## *Keeping the Pluralist Hypothesis Alive in the Era of Interfaith Relations*
## A Response by Abraham Vélez de Cea to Aimee Light

(original article: http://irdialogue.org/journal/issue01/post-pluralism-through-the-lens-of-post-modernity"-by-aimee-upjohn-light-duquesne-university/)

According to Aimee Light, we live in a post-pluralist era that was "created by the demise of the pluralist hypothesis and the problems facing authors who follow in its wake."[31] In contrast, I would like to suggest that we live in the era of interfaith relations, where the pluralist hypothesis—that is, the idea that different faith traditions need not be in tension or in conflict, but express various experiences of the Ultimate or Most Important—still provides the best possible foundation for interreligious dialogue and comparative theology. Interfaith relations are leading many to reconsider both exclusivist and inclusivist views, thus leaving behind parochial, narcissistic, and condescending attitudes toward other traditions. In this age of interfaith relations, taking our religious and secular neighbors seriously and upholding our convictions with intellectual humility are no longer options, but rather imperatives indispensable for fostering harmonious and collaborative interfaith relations.

I do not think that considering one's religion the center of the universe, which is what both exclusivist and inclusivist hypotheses entail, is tenable in the era of interfaith relations. That is why it seems to me a bit premature to talk about the demise of the pluralist hypothesis precisely in this era of increasing religious diversity and interaction among the religions due to globalization. In what follows, I would like instead to propose a new formulation of the pluralist hypothesis that does not ignore postmodern insights, and that is not necessarily committed to the epistemological and ontological assumptions of John Hick's pluralism.

The pluralist hypothesis was originally formulated by Hick,[32] but it would be a profound mistake to equate his specific form of pluralism with the pluralist hypothesis. Just as Copernicus rejected that the Earth was at the center of the universe and that all the other planets turned around it, the pluralist hypothesis rejects that one's religion is at the center of the religious universe and that all the other religions are oriented towards or revolve around one's religion. Instead, the pluralist hypothesis assumes that religions are intrinsically interrelated, thus in need of constructive dialogue with each other, because they all revolve around a "common" sun, which is an open-ended symbol, not a fixed concept to be univocally understood across traditions.

When Light pronounces dead the pluralist hypothesis and advocates inclusivist positions that make use of the category of postmodernity, she is certainly not proposing a return to Ptolemaic, geocentric, mono-religiocentric forms of inclusivism. A mono-religiocentric inclusivist hypothesis according to which only one religion is the center of all the other religions would be premodern and, therefore, Light and I agree, totally inadequate for the postmodern era of interfaith relations in which we live.

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[31] Aimee Light, "Post-Pluralism Through the Lens of Post-Modernity," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 1 (April 2009): 68.

[32] For a short and accessible introduction to the pluralist hypothesis, see John Hick, "Is Christianity the Only True Religion or One among Others" (a talk given to a theological society in Norwich, England), 2001. http://www.johnhick.org.uk/article2.pdf

Another alternative to the pluralist hypothesis would be a pluri-religiocentric hypothesis in which religions are compared to extremely distinct galaxies, each one with their own, unrelated, tradition-specific centers. But this hypothesis would also be inadequate for our times because it leads to either relativism or solipsistic particularism.[33] Only a pluralist hypothesis with a "common" sun shared by a multiplicity of different yet interrelated religious planets can avoid relativism and solipsistic particularism, thus providing a robust foundation for comparative theology and interfaith dialogue.

The sun of the pluralist hypothesis should not be thought of in essentialist terms as a common denominator or as a monolithic reality that is exactly the same across traditions. Rather, the pluralist sun is a symbol that allows for multiple tradition-specific interpretations. The pluralist hypothesis does not define the sun in absolute and universal terms, because the sun functions as a symbol, not as a fixed concept. The symbol of the sun stands for that which functions as the most important X within a particular religious tradition, where X may refer to the ultimate reality, goal, truth, value, etc., depending on the context and the tradition/s under discussion.[34]

When X refers to an Ultimate Reality, it should be noted that the pluralist hypothesis as such leaves open ontological questions about whether such Ultimate Reality is one and/or many, transcendent and/or immanent, personal and/or transpersonal. Similarly, the pluralist hypothesis as such is not necessarily committed to a particular epistemology. For instance, the pluralist does not need to assume that X is an unknowable "thing in itself" beyond the phenomena known by religions. Epistemological and ontological questions about the sun (X) must be answered by specific theologians within their respective traditions.

The pluralist hypothesis as such does not specify the nature of the sun (X) nor the exact amount of knowledge that religions and secular traditions may possess; the hypothesis simply states that there is a "common" sun whose light (salvific wisdom, good, truth, beauty, grace, transformative power, presence, revelation, etc.,) is shared to a lesser or greater extent by diverse religious planets.

By assuming a "common" yet not necessarily identical sun shared differently by different planets, the pluralist hypothesis cannot be accused of failing to respect differences or the particularities of specific traditions.[35] For the pluralist, there are irreducible differences among traditions and the particularities of each tradition truly matter precisely because they provide unique and irreplaceable insights into the "nature" of the sun and its rays of light. But differences among the traditions presuppose a fundamental similarity, at the very least that they all relate to each other inasmuch as they share a "common" source of light. This combination of relative similarity and relative difference among traditions, characteristic of the pluralist hypothesis, allows for cross-cultural comparisons and meaningful interfaith communication. Traditions are intrinsically interrelated because they all share a "common" sun, thus they are in need of

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[33] For a sharp critique of solipsistic particularism, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (SCM Press: London), 146-196.

[34] For a justification of a non-essentialist and non-equivocal understanding of X and its application to comparative theology of religions, see Abraham Vélez de Cea, *The Buddha and Religious Diversity* (Routledge: London, 2013).

[35] For a response to this and other common objections against pluralism, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Religious Pluralism and the Need for an Interreligious Theology," in *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: An Ongoing Engagement with John Hick* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 19-33.

dialogue with one another not only for practical reasons but also in order to refine and enhance what they perceive of the sun from their unique and irreplaceable perspectives.
The pluralist hypothesis affirms a plurality of different religious and secular planets that share a "common" sun. However, the pluralist hypothesis could also be formulated as affirming a plurality of different religious and secular galaxies with multiple centers, but adding that such multiplicity of centers are somewhat "concentric" or at least part of the "same" universe. That is, the pluralist hypothesis presupposes the interrelatedness of traditions, a "common" X underlying the irreducible differences that exist among them.

It is important to clarify that regardless of the particular formulation one may adopt, the pluralist hypothesis is primarily about rejecting religiocentrism and affirming the interrelatedness of religions. This conception of pluralism is substantially different from the prevalent conception advocated by Hick, Knitter, and Schmidt-Leukel, which emphasizes the equal validity of religions and the absence of superiority claims. I do not think that the pluralist hypothesis requires the absence of superiority claims or an affirmation that religions are equally valid or equally true or equally good. Pluralism is not about believing that all religious planets are equal, that all the planets are equally close to the sun, or that the light of the sun is equally present in all the planets.[36]

Light contends that inclusivism is the theology of religions most appropriate for our postmodern times. In her words: "Inclusivism then becomes our most consistent option, but only as a temporary measure…anything we say must be acknowledged as partial, and as serving a finite, fallen agenda."[37] I must admit that I fail to understand what putting forth an inclusivist position as a temporary measure actually means. If she means mono-religiocentric inclusivism, which claims that one's own religious planet is the absolute center of the universe, how is it possible to hold such a claim as a temporary measure? If she means pluri-religiocentric inclusivism, which claims that each religious galaxy has its own, radically different, non-concentric center, then why should we bother to hold our respective inclusivisms as a temporary measure? It is only because we live in the "same" galaxy with a "common" sun or in the "same" universe with a "common" center that it makes perfect sense to hold our convictions with more intellectual humility and with greater openness to what other religions have to say from their unique and irreplaceable perspectives.

Light mentions two objections against pluralism as if they applied to all forms of pluralism, and as if the objections were fatal—that is, as if pluralists had nothing else to say in response to such objections.[38] The first objection is that pluralism misrepresents religions because it posits another religious object beyond what religions take themselves to be worshipping or be in a relationship

[36] It could be said, however, that traditions are "equal" in the sense that they all "equally" share a "common" sun, but such "equality" does not need to mean that they share the sun equally in a literal sense, that is, from the same perspective and to the same extent.
[37] Light, "Post-pluralism," 69-70.
[38] John Hick himself addressed a great variety of objections; see for instance Harold Hewitt Jr. (ed.), *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion. Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1991); John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2001, reissued in 2010 with a preface by Perry Schmidt-Leukel); John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: WJK Press 1995). I am indebted to Perry Schmidt-Leukel for this reference.

with.[39] As I understand pluralism, it would be a mistake to understand the sun of the pluralist hypothesis as another religious object beyond the religions. Rather, what pluralists emphasize is a neglected aspect of the sun, namely, its ineffable and incomprehensible aspect. It is precisely that ultimately mysterious or not-yet-fully-known aspect of the sun which encourages pluralists to learn from and be enriched by other traditions. It is that mysterious aspect that allows the reconciliation, without logical contradiction, of conflicting yet complementary perspectives of the sun. What pluralists posit is the aspect of the sun that transcends words and concepts about the sun, not another religious "object" beyond the actual "objects" of the religions.

The second objection that Light mentions is that pluralism claims to affirm the truth of multiple religions but affirms only itself as the correct metaphysical worldview.[40] Again, the pluralist hypothesis is called hypothesis for a reason, i.e., it is not to be misunderstood as the true metaphysical worldview which replaces the less perfect worldviews of religions. Even Hick states that pluralism is intended to be held within specific religions, i.e. by a Christian pluralist, a Jewish pluralist, a Buddhist pluralist, and so on.[41] Pluralists are not in the business of affirming pluralism independently of religions because that would turn it into a new religion. Holding the pluralist hypothesis within specific religions does not create a new religion but rather a new interpretation of one's own religion, an interpretation that takes seriously other religious perspectives and upholds one's own convictions with intellectual humility, i.e., without claiming that one's own faith is the center of any other faiths.

I fully agree with Light in that theologies of religions today need to take into account the critiques of post-structuralism and post-modernity, adopting "a self-critical attitude towards speech and knowledge" and "applying the attitude of suspicion to our supposedly universal, absolute, and exclusionary truth claims." But this is precisely the whole point of the pluralist hypothesis and its emphasis on the ultimately ineffable and incomprehensible aspect of the sun. If anything, pluralism and the pluralist hypothesis relativize absolute and universal claims about one's own religion.

Adopting the pluralist hypothesis need not be inconsistent with the orthodoxy of religions. For instance, a Christian pluralist may still believe that Jesus Christ is central and universally relevant, but not the center of all the other religions, unless someone would like to hold the unorthodox belief in the eternal existence of the historical Jesus. Likewise, a Buddhist pluralist may still consider the Buddha's teachings central and cosmically significant, but not the center of all the other manifestations of the Dharma, unless someone would like to hold (as necessary parts of the Dharma) unscientific Buddhist beliefs about the universe, i.e., that there can be only one Buddha per cosmic period, that non-Buddhist enlightened beings cannot exist in the same

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[39] Light, "Post-pluralism," 68. "Pluralism claimed to represent all the religions by suggesting the existence of a religious object behind "God," Yahweh," "Allah," "Brahman," and so forth, but pluralism is now seen to misrepresent the religions by positing a religious object which is other than what Jews, Christian, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists take themselves to be worshipping or in relationship with."
[40] Light, "Post-pluralism," 68. "Pluralism claimed to affirm the truth of multiple religions, but instead affirms only itself as the correct metaphysical worldview—the one beyond Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism."
[41] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Yale University Press; 2nd Revised edition, 2005), 2, 378. I am indebted to Perry Schmidt-Leukel for this reference.

universe in which Buddhas and Buddhist traditions exist, that Mount Sumeru is the center of the universe, and so on.

The pluralist hypothesis is intended to be held from the perspective of different religions, never in competition with them. For instance, a pluralist Catholic may understand the Sun as referring to God. The pluralist Catholic will not contend that the Christian planet, i.e., historical Christianity, is the center of all the religions. Rather, the Christian pluralist would contend that the rays of light that derive from God fall directly on multiple planets in different ways, and without being necessarily dependent on the light that falls on the Christian planet. By saying this, the Christian pluralist does not need to compromise the necessity of Christ, or to separate the eternal Word from the incarnated Word, or to posit several independently valid economies of salvation. Similarly, a pluralist Buddhist may interpret the Sun of the pluralist hypothesis as the Dharma. The pluralist Buddhist will not say that the Buddhist planet is the center of all possible manifestations of the Dharma. Instead, a pluralist Buddhist would state that the Dharma is not the monopoly of Buddhist traditions and that the light of the Dharma may in principle shine outside and independently of historical Buddhism. By saying this, the pluralist Buddhist would simply be restating the traditional Buddhist self-understanding according to which the Buddha rediscovered rather than invented the eternal Dharma.

Aimee Light affirms that "invariably, authors following in pluralism's wake have retreated into forms of inclusivism." As instances of post-pluralist inclusivists, she discusses the theologies of Jacques Dupuis and Mark Heim. However, I find this assessment of contemporary Christian theology of religions problematic in two ways.[42] First, I do not think it is fair to describe Dupuis' and Heim's theologies of religions as a retreat into inclusivism. Rather, Heim and Dupuis seem to be best understood as attempting to transcend inclusivism, but without going as far as pluralism. That is, Dupuis and Heim represent a new intermediate position between inclusivism and pluralism. Perhaps the terms "pluralistic-inclusivism" or "inclusive pluralism" can be useful to capture this new in-between position of a growing number of theologians including Dupuis and Heim. In the new typology that I have developed to facilitate interfaith dialogue and comparative theology of religions, I characterize pluralistic-inclusivism in terms of openness not only to similar aspects of X in other traditions (open inclusivism), but also to new/different aspects of X. Unlike pluralists, pluralistic-inclusivists constrain their genuine openness to new/different aspects of X with non-negotiable dogmatic claims.[43]

Second, I do not see enough evidence to affirm that authors following in pluralism's wake have retreated into inclusivism. Rather, what I perceive is a growing number of pluralistic-inclusivists or inclusive-pluralists who are trying to open up the still prevalent exclusivism and inclusivism of their respective traditions. I attribute this greater openness toward the possible contribution of other religions not only to globalization and more awareness of religious diversity, but also to the challenging influence of pluralist theologians.

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[42] For a still useful account of contemporary Christian theologies of religions see *Christian Approaches to other Faiths*, eds. Paul Hedges and Alan Race (London: SCM Press, 2008).

[43] I truly appreciate the positive reviews of my book *The Buddha and Religious Diversity* by Amos Yong, Peter Phan, and Rita Gross, as well as the discussion of my work by Paul Hedges. However, I humbly believe that understanding theologies of religions in terms of different degrees of openness, and distinguishing between views and attitudes toward other religions, still have much to offer to contemporary discussions.

We do not live in a post-pluralist era, not only because the pluralist hypothesis continues to make more sense than exclusivist and inclusivist hypotheses, but also because there are still many respectable forms of pluralism that are far from being dead or passé. It is true that John Hick died in 2012, but there are still many convergent pluralists like Paul Knitter, Alan Race, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel who are flourishing; they continue to publish influential books, they are invited to deliver prestigious lectures all over the world, and they continue to participate in first rank international conferences. Likewise, Raimon Panikkar died in 2010, but his complete works are being published in several languages, and there is a growing interest in his comparative theology as well as in his greatly unappreciated understanding of pluralism, which is primarily an attitude towards reason and dialogue. The same could be said about the "deep pluralism" of David Ray Griffin and John B. Cobb Jr.; the "Pluralism Project" and Diane Eck's conception of pluralism as a process to be constructed by each generation; Roger Haight's postmodern pluralism; Paul Hedges' radical openness, etc. These Christian expressions of pluralism as well as other forms of pluralism outside Christianity must be kept alive in the era of interfaith relations, so that interreligious dialogue and comparative theology can continue to flourish.

Born in Saragossa, Spain, **Dr. J. Abraham Vélez de Cea** is a comparative theologian who has taught Interfaith Dialogue, Buddhism, and World Religions at Eastern Kentucky University since 2006. He came to the US in 2002; before joining EKU in 2006, he taught Buddhism, Buddhist Ethics, and Buddhist-Christian Mysticism in the department of theology at Georgetown University. He is active in the Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflective Group of the AAR, and serves as the chair of the Frederick J. Streng Book Award for excellence in Buddhist-Christian Studies. He is the author of *The Buddha and Religious Diversity* (Routledge, 2013), which discusses the Buddha's attitude towards religious diversity in conversation with Christian theology of religions. He is currently working on a book about multiple religious belonging and the possibility of being a disciple of Buddha and Jesus at the same time.

## *Reflections on the History of the Journal of Inter-Religious Studies: A Conversation*

**Sue Fendrick, Celene Ibrahim, Jennifer Peace, Or Rose, Josh Stanton, and Stephanie Varnon-Hughes**

*This is an edited transcript of a conversation that took place in February 2016, facilitated by the current JIRS Editor-in-Chief (SF), with its founding editors (SVN and JS) and its co-publishers (CI, JP, and OR).*

PART I: BEGINNINGS AND LANGUAGE

SUE: Stephanie and Josh, I'd like to ask the two of you to start us off by doing a bit of both reminiscing and analyzing. Tell us about the beginning of the Journal--how it was formed, how it developed, and how it grew in the early days?

JOSH: Stephanie, why don't you start with the e-mail you got out of the blue from a rabbinical student in Jerusalem?

STEPHANIE: In 2008, I was a student at Union Theological Seminary, and I was editor of the student paper there and student senate co-chair. In those capacities, my e-mail address was on the website. Union had just brought Professor Paul Knitter over and had started to do a lot more interfaith work. One day, I got an e-mail saying, "I'm a rabbinical student, and I'm interested in doing an interfaith magazine for seminarians. I'm wondering what's going on where you are with interfaith work? Are you guys doing anything?"

My reaction was, "Oh, yeah. Let me tell you about what we're doing!" I told him what I was working on personally and what was happening at Union, and we started e-mailing back and forth. He told me more about his own work and his idea for a journal or magazine. We started to pursue it, and over time, as we began to interview potential board members and potential staff people, the idea became clearer that there really wasn't a place for younger faculty members, or any faculty or scholars, to publish this kind of article—that is, articles that were truly interreligious. Not comparative theology, not comparative religion, not monoreligious, but a journal that was academic, peer-reviewed, and not affiliated with a single religion. It feels very strange to me that two grad students could think to themselves, "There's this hole in the field--we should just start something and fill it," but that's what we did.

Josh was in Jerusalem, and I was in New York City. We estimate that, by the time we met for the first time in New York, we had already worked together for 1,000 hours over Skype, phone, and e-mail. When we met in person, it struck me that he was a lot taller than he sounds on e-mail!

SUE: What was it that occasioned this realization, and what was happening for scholars who were doing what they considered work in interreligious studies before this? Were people even thinking of that as a field? What was happening before the Journal's existence?

JOSH: I was an angsty rabbinical student who was really stunned that I was studying in Jerusalem and not even learning outside my denomination, much less my tradition. I had been involved in interfaith work for a while, and it just didn't make sense to me. As I talked with people, it seemed like there wasn't really an extant field of interreligious studies. And so there wasn't necessarily a set of resources, even the academic literature that one would hope for if trying to study other religious traditions, especially in a city like Jerusalem. That was what prompted my e-mail to Stephanie; my call to Eboo Patel, who was then Executive Director of the Interfaith Youth Core where I had been a fellow; and a lot of related conversations.

There were a few other publications in the field at the time, including the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies,* as well as *Interreligious Insight* which is based out of the UK. It struck me that they were working with a very traditional academic model that was not making use of the Internet, and of the growing network of scholars and practitioners who were really, in a more ad hoc way, building this field.

So, there might be a scholar of theology, who happened to do a lot of comparative work, and was sort of inching toward interreligious studies; or a practitioner of interreligious work who was starting to do the reflective piece, making sense of which programs worked in an interfaith context and which didn't. People were starting to generate the articles, the stories, and other writings in what would now be seen as interreligious studies, but there wasn't necessarily the forum to tie them together. They were talking largely in silos.

I think our hope--and I would say the beautiful naiveté of two graduate students—was that we could somehow move things forward by getting the right people in the room. A real advantage that Stephanie and I had is that, as graduate students, it was already clear that we could only be conveners. We couldn't be the ones directing the conversation. I think that was tremendously important, and helpful, coming from a place of humility and uncertainty, as we tried to weave together the beautiful and brilliant voices that weren't necessarily in dialogue with each other.

SUE: I think that there might be a piece to be written on the beauty that can emerge precisely from a humble approach to a piece of work.

Jenny, Or, and Celene--what can you add from your sense of where the field of interreligious studies was eight years ago, and especially in terms of publishing, whether you have any sense of why there was this gap and whether there was even a perception of the gap at that point in time?

JENNY: I do think that Josh and Stephanie identified an important gap, while at the same time there were different strands of this work going on in different ways. For me, interreligious studies or interfaith studies is really the joining together of two movements, two sectors, where we think about how we relate to each other across religious lines.

One is the interfaith movement world--for example, the North American Interfaith Network (NAIN), a decades-old, grassroots organization that was involved in thinking about how we relate across religious lines; and organizations that I was involved with in the 90s like the Interfaith Youth Core, the United Religions Initiative, the Parliament of World Religions, and the Interfaith Center of New York. There were a lot of national interfaith organizations that were

very actively talking, thinking, and organizing people, both academics and religious professionals. That's an important backdrop against which the idea for the Journal really was an important next step.

In Europe, there is also *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, which is a journal launched about 25 years ago. There are also a number of academic faculty titles in European universities that include the language of interreligious dialogue or interreligious studies.

So I think Josh's insight is a good one--that there were threads and strands of this work going on in different ways and places, but there wasn't really an American online journal that captured that energy. *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* is noteworthy and important here, though, because even though the title is *Ecumenical Studies*—which usually refers to intra-Christian issues--they really expanded pretty quickly to include multiple religious voices in ways that we could call interreligious studies.

A last thing to note is that this word or phrase that we use easily now—"interreligious"—is still something that's developing in academia. Things change really slowly in academia, but I think we are moving from the paradigm of a history of religions or world religions approach to studying other religious traditions, into using the language of interreligious studies--at least in certain places. It's just beginning, and is still in its early stages.

The Journal is ahead of its time in terms of helping legitimate and focus people's interest and energy around this language, and fostering thinking about new paradigms for how we study and engage with each other across religious lines.

SUE: Let's pick up on the language of "interreligious dialogue" (which was in the original title of the Journal) vs. the phrase "interreligious studies." Can you talk about the significance of those phrases as you think about the beginnings of the Journal?

STEPHANIE: That's a question that comes up in just about every manifestation of this conversation that I've had over the last ten years: Is it interreligious? Is it interfaith? Is it dialogue? Is it studies? Is it multireligious? Is it multifaith? Is it interfaith? Is it interbeing?

This came up even when we were interviewing staff. I remember an early staff member, the founding Executive Editor Aimee Light, talking about "inter-religious" versus "inter-faith." As Josh and I thought and talked about it in 2008, we landed on "inter-religious" because some of the traditions we were looking at and thinking about might not group themselves in the category of "faith," and the word "religious" also felt more academic--and dialogue was really what we were doing.I don't think the idea of interreligious studies per se even entered my mind until a couple of years later.

We can get even more granular and think about the fact that we hyphenate "inter-religious" in the journal title, and increasingly, that word isn't hyphenated anymore, and interfaith isn't either. That's just a nice tracking of the way language works: As we get used to ideas, we're more comfortable seeing them represented with their own word.

Later on, we became a part of CIRCLE [the Center for Inter-Religious & Communal Leadership and Education, a joint project of Hebrew College and Andover Newton Theological Seminary], working with its co-directors Jenny, Or, and eventually Celene, and other people who have been really instrumental in making a space in the academy for this to be a known and clearly-stated discipline and area of work. And that area has been increasingly known as the field of interreligious (and sometimes interfaith) studies, which eventually was reflected in our name change.

The Journal had already been independently growing and shifting focus. When we came to CIRCLE in 2012, it was about the same time that this idea of naming the field, and making a space for it in the American Academy of Religion, was happening. So we took the opportunity to rebrand, refresh, and renew the Journal with a new and clearer name: The Journal of Inter-religious Studies.

JENNY: I think we were explicitly tying it in with the new group at the American Academy of Religion, with the idea that the term "studies"--as in "ecumenical studies" and "feminist studies"--is often (especially when a field is new and emerging) a kind of broad umbrella for a number of different approaches to a topic.

Dialogue is a sub-category of interreligious engagement, of the kind of work one might do under the auspices of interreligious studies. But we wanted to cast a broader net, to catch the different ways people were talking about and doing this work that might bridge the interfaith movement and the academic study of it. So that was another part of the motivation.

I remember Josh, Or, and I having a very heated and passionate conversation in Or's office about the words "interreligious" versus "interfaith." Because I came out of the interfaith movement, that word was very near and dear to my heart, and we went back and forth a lot in a wonderful way that ended up resulting in my using both words in the title of the new academic group I cofounded at the AAR, to give a broad invitation to people who might identify their work in different ways.

JOSH: I think one of the funny things is that we could still continue that debate. For example, I could jump in and say, "By the way, it's 'interreligious,' just for the record." [Laughter] It's an enduring place of healthy, constructive tension.

JENNY: You're right—but to be honest, I think it will fizzle out in the next five years. Part of building a field is settling on some of the language, and really, it's sort of an intellectual democracy at work. Somebody comes up with an articulation that wins people over, and more and more, they'll start saying, "Oh, interreligious means this, and interfaith means that, and this is why I'm using this term."

STEPHANIE: Honestly, I think I'm squarely in the interfaith camp now.

When I was younger, with linguistics and grammar, I was a prescriptivist. I felt like, "This is the way it works in English." And now that I'm older, and I've experienced more languages, and more human nature, I'm a descriptivist. I'm more likely to say, "Oh, this is what we do to make

language work for us." Tracking the word with a linguistic, developmental psychologist, and teacher lens, I think that "interfaith" is more accessible for many reasons: It's shorter, it's easier to say, and there are lots of college programs that use that word. So I think that's where I've landed.

A related, important footnote here is the work of Chris Stedman, and other atheists, secular humanists, agnostics, and "faitheists" (the title of Chris's book). For some of them, particularly people younger than me, the word "interfaith" has a currency that "interreligious" doesn't. If we look at the data from the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) from the last couple of years, 51 percent of their alumni/ae polled reported that they identify as agnostic, humanist, or spiritual--but not religious.

That is the growing face of the interfaith movement, and I think that when Chris and others use the word "faitheist"—combining "faith" and "atheist"--that provides a little linguistic tickle that makes "interfaith" more accessible to that particular audience.

SUE:: So, on one hand, "interfaith" felt not quite as inclusive, because some religious traditions aren't best described as a "faith." But on the other hand, for people who don't identify with a religious tradition, "faith," and "interfaith" are more open words that let people who are relating to issues of belief and purpose consider themselves under that umbrella.

STEPHANIE: Well, at least as it has turned out in the past five or six years.

PART II: INSTITUTIONS AND STATE OF FORMATION

SUE: Is there anything important about the early years of the Journal that we haven't talked about?

STEPHANIE: I think we should acknowledge the fact that we had some key support early on, at first from an anonymous gift, and then financial and institutional support from Auburn Theological Seminary.

JOSH: Yes--we got an anonymous gift of about $10,000 from within the Jewish community where I grew up to get us started. Without that, we really would have had a tough time launching, in terms of designing a website and making things come together in the way that they did. That was tremendously important.

We also had the support of the Interfaith Youth Core. They served as our fiscal agent from the beginning, so we could process the anonymous donation and bring the Journal to life. They also gave us a lot of mentoring and guidance in the practical elements of running an organization, because Stephanie and I had never supervised a staff before. It was kind of ridiculous, really--I was 22, and Stephanie and I were working with and supervising a staff of several people fairly quickly. Fortunately, IFYC really helped us with HR and other management aspects of starting the Journal. From there, we found a longer-term home at Auburn, and they were tremendously helpful; Rabbi Justus Baird was singular. They taught us about fundraising and networking, and we made some really important connections there.

And then we found our way to CIRCLE, the long-term and very happy home for the Journal. We have been so blessed. If there's an enduring lesson of the Journal, it's that collaboration and partnerships are key. If Stephanie and I had tried to just do this on our own, it could not have happened. And when you're trying to support and cultivate a whole field of study, it almost definitionally can't happen alone.

SUE: Before we get to CIRCLE, who were the various staff members and what did they do at the Journal?

JOSH: In addition to Aimee Light—a brilliant theologian at Duquesne University who continues to serve on the JIRS Board--we also had: Stephen Butler Murray, now the president of a seminary in Detroit; Sophia Khan, now a writer, filmmaker, and activist; Matt Dougherty, a PhD candidate in religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Kate Fridkis, a writer and activist; Karen Leslie Hernandez, a scholar at the University of Rhode Island; and Michael C. M. Woolf, a ThD candidate at Harvard.

STEPHANIE: And in the early days of SoF, in addition to Chris Stedman, we also had Ian Burzynski, who now runs an NGO working to help students and schools in Bangladesh; Tim Brauhn, with the Islamic Networks Group; and Honna Eichler George, who does development at the Society of Women Engineers in Chicago.

These are the people who over the years were involved in editing, web support and development, technological support and development, brainstorming and planning, and eventually building State of Formation as well. When I stop and think about these early voices, these essential staff members, it's amazing to note what they are doing now and to think about the legacy of their work in building the two projects.

SUE: I get the sense that there was a great feeling of a collectivity--although I know that people were paid nominally and had specific roles--with you two master-minding and coordinating the whole thing. Is that a fair description?

JOSH: I think there was a sense of collective responsibility and shared dream. People felt like they were plugging into something bigger than themselves, and something that could make an enduring difference. And yes, I would say that our incredibly nominal salaries were not a big draw. But the sense of purpose was.

STEPHANIE: And we did function as a staff. There were weekly staff calls and twice-a-year staff evaluations; there was professional development taking place. People had defined roles, and were trying to get their specific tasks done--but there was definitely a sense for everyone that this is a new project, I'm excited to be participating in it, and I'm going to lend my expertise to make it happen.

SUE: Let's transition now, and actually talk about the transition. Things were very vibrant and you had a happy home at Auburn. Stephanie and Josh, what led you to approach CIRCLE to house, sponsor, and supervise the Journal? Jenny and Or, what led you to want to take this on? How did that partnership begin?

OR: On the CIRCLE side--observing the entrepreneurial work that Josh, Stephanie, and their peers had done; taking note of the growth of this nascent field of interreligious or interfaith studies; seeing that there was a space for an online forum in which the theories and practices of this field were both important--we felt like there was an opportunity to bring together both people and energies in a synergistic way.

At the root of that arrangement were the personal relationships that we had developed with Josh and Stephanie, whom we met through the Interfaith Youth Core. Through a series of conversations, we decided collectively that this was an arrangement that we felt would be constructive, both for Hebrew College and Andover Newton, and for the Journal.

The hope was that we could build on the founders' energy and help to create sustainability by institutionalizing the Journal and State of Formation within the framework of CIRCLE. That was the major impetus. Of course, in the process we had to sort out from each side how things would be different--even if we agreed that this change was productive--because every change brings with it some loss, and that needed to be processed.

STEPHANIE: I will add that initially, I was really hesitant about moving again. I'm not from the East Coast; New York and Boston felt very foreign, and at times hostile to me. Auburn at least had been right near Union, where I lived—I could see it from my dorm; that little corner of the Upper West Side was like my nest. There were weeks when I didn't leave that block. I'm also much more resistant to change than Josh. The idea of being housed at two unfamiliar places, in Boston—far away in another city--seemed like it was going to be more cumbersome.

But the particular detail that, at the time, there were two CIRCLE co-directors, Jewish and Christian, a man and woman--that was very familiar. I felt like, "There's another pair like us out there doing this work--they're very different, and we're very different." The fact that each pair had differences in how they navigate things actually made me feel reassured; there was a familiarity there that made it more possible to entertain the notion of moving. It was also clear that Jenny and Or had a personal commitment to collaboration, and a personal love and joy in working closely with people, that were necessary ingredients in their faith work, and that felt comfortable, welcoming, and safe.

SUE: So what was the motivation for thinking of moving at all?

STEPHANIE: Our memos of understanding with Auburn were one year at a time, and when we started at Auburn, Josh and I didn't want to give away any control. We thought we just needed a few things--a fiscal agent, an office, and a little bit of mentoring…We essentially felt: This is ours. We don't need a lot of help. We can do this. But I think one effect of our relationship with Auburn was starting to grow up a little bit, and to think to ourselves, well, we could actually use a lot more institutional support. We would like to be in a place where we would have more ongoing, daily, systematic interactions with other collaborators. Auburn had been great: they gave us space and support when we needed it, but they were also happy to let us just be. And we weren't part of the systematic, daily, weekly, and monthly life of the organization, because we didn't want to be.

So, as we were still doing the year-by-year MOUs, we were very much continuing to wonder: Is this what we want? Is this what we need? And we started looking for someplace to be more substantially and systematically involved with other collaborators.

JOSH: I think there were a few different elements. CIRCLE and the Journal had such obvious mission alignment. Auburn had just shifted around a number of staff members and sharpened its strategic focus to be somewhat less academic and a bit more focused on the public interfaith discourse. And though that's a really important conversation to be in, it felt different from what we were doing. Also, we trusted Jenny and Or, and we were excited about the possibility of working with them in a lot of different ways. With Or and Jenny, we felt like we had, in Jewish language, two *havrutas*—two pairings of beloved professional colleagues who'd been doing this work together, arguing, debating, and wrestling with all of the important issues that come up.

I think the resonance that Stephanie suggested is right on target--we felt that we would have really important and wonderful partners in dialogue internally, which would then translate into meaningful, helpful, and beautiful--if challenging--dialogue externally.

SUE: It really does sound like a great fit; I think you should make the move! [Laughter] Let's look at another aspect of the Journal's growth and reach. We really haven't talked about State of Formation (SOF) at all. Although our focus in this conversation is mainly on the history of the Journal, I want to invite all of you to talk a bit about the impetus for SOF, its sister publication; its early relationship to the Journal; and the development of that relationship between the two projects.

JOSH: I remember very vividly its beginnings: After a day at Mt. Sinai Hospital as a chaplain intern, I walked into Central Park with my phone and had an amazing conference call with Stephanie, Chris Stedman from the Interfaith Youth Core, and Matthew Black from the Council for the Parliament of World's Religions--debating and discussing and opening the possibility for a new publication. We were trying to figure out what a forum would look like, for seminary students like us and clergy just getting started in the field, to do active and ongoing reflections, blogging about what it was like to be stepping as leaders into the world's most religiously diverse society.

We wanted to capture the personal angle—to get something a little more popular out there that was connective and story-oriented, and could help us raise up a whole cohort of leaders dedicated to interfaith practice and interfaith learning, telling the story of what that meant. Chris came up with the name "State of Formation," and then we gradually put it together: We designed the website and put out a call for State of Formation scholars, and we got a large initial cohort.

In a funny and maybe surprising way, State of Formation may have more people reading it than the Journal itself, but we felt that together they created a healthy and happy ecosystem: if you want something quick, easy, and popular, great--go to State of Formation. If you want something deeper and more analytical, and more rigorously academic, go to the Journal. We felt that many of our SOF scholars were emerging leaders and would really be excited about what the Journal had to offer, and likewise, that a lot of the readers of the Journal would be quite interested to hear the narratives, thoughts, and reflections of our young scholars in State of Formation.

It was an early and quick success, but it also took a fair amount of work, because there was ongoing content to solicit and edit. One of the interesting things happening in parallel was that Chris, who initially managed and edited SOF, was going from being Chris Stedman, random guy at the Interfaith Youth Core, to Chris Stedman, TV personality and author. So one of the interesting meta-narratives was of Chris's emergence as a scholar and practitioner in the field. After about a year, he had to transition out of SOF; he just found himself overwhelmed. But there was kind of a beauty to the arc of his career and how it was working in parallel with the arc of the project that he helped to envision and launch.

JENNY: One thing that you sparked for me, Josh, is that I think there's a balance between the energy of younger scholars and activists and the stability of the institutional partnerships that you forged with us that creates, at its best, a really good dynamic. So when Chris needed to go off and pursue some other things, State of Formation didn't disappear because it had from the start an institutional home.

There was a lovely sense that there was somewhere for all these brilliant, creative folks to go with their great ideas, which would allow both some freedom and flexibility as their own vocational trajectories emerged, and some institutional continuity in which the publication could continue to flow.

STEPHANIE: I want to point out the fact that Hebrew College, Andover Newton, and Jenny and Or facilitated all of us coming to Newton, and staying overnight there, eating there, and praying there, and meeting with the leadership there. That really is an example of how important institutional support and even actual space can be. There were nearly 25 people there, and Jenny and Or invited Diana Eck to come meet with us.

If that in-person meeting hadn't happened, I don't think SOF would have so quickly become fruitful, rich, and full of possibility. And I think if you look at the people who were there at that retreat, and where they are now, it's pretty amazing. That's the power of CIRCLE, of Jenny and Or, of institutions, of dorms and food and face-to-face time—the power of institutional support and commitment. It made a huge difference.

OR: I want to add that, from the perspective of our respective institutions, part of what made good sense about SOF is that we had already been working with student fellows on our campuses, and that became a central element of the work of CIRCLE. This represented an opportunity to help mentor and engage with a wider group of creative and entrepreneurial students who were interested in advancing this field on a national level. So it felt like it was very much in keeping with the existing mission of CIRCLE, and it gave us an opportunity to think broadly about the development of this field among emerging leaders on a larger scale.

The relationship of CIRCLE both with the Journal and with State of Formation represented what we thought was not mission creep, but rather an extension of the vision we were developing. We also recognize that the opportunity to mentor, work with, and learn from a cohort of emerging, religious leaders would allow us to be involved in conversations on a somewhat broader level and would bring new energy to the work that we were doing locally.

PART III: MISSION AND VISION

SUE: Let me pick up on the subject of mission as we get back to talking about the Journal itself. What can you say about anything that might loosely go along with “mission” – direction, focus, any of those kinds of things – that might reflect conversations and even disagreements about what the Journal might focus on and how? I’d like to invite our readers into any of those conversations, and even conflicts, about what the Journal is, what it is doing, and what it should be doing.

JENNY: One thing that happened is that, while Josh and Stephanie were very autonomous when they were at Auburn, over the years we have gone back and forth about how much oversight and involvement the CIRCLE co-directors actually should have with either publication. The question of how to strike a balance between oversight and autonomy is, I think, an ongoing and open question, and something that--even each of us as co-directors--may have different feelings about at different times.

One thing that we did fairly soon after the transition of the Journal to being housed at CIRCLE was to take a look at the call for submissions, which had previously been a very open process. Josh and Stephanie did a lot of work to get out a broad call, to encourage lots of good submissions on a range of topics. From this open call model we moved to a pattern of three issues each year: one focused on papers coming out of the American Academy of Religion’s “Interreligious and Interfaith studies” group, one focused on highlighting a particular organization or center that does this work, and inviting someone from that organization to curate the issue, and a third issue each year that retains an open call format.

This cycle is still fairly new, and it marks more active involvement and engagement by the CIRCLE co-directors. Sue, when you came on board, it marked the first time someone who wasn’t part of the founding vision for the Journal or its relationship with CIRCLE took on a key leadership role. This is allowing us to look at everything again with your fresh eyes.

SUE: In terms of content: How have you each and together thought about, and even disagreed about or wrestled with, a vision for what should actually be in the Journal--what should be happening in its pages, what kinds of things we should be publishing, what the purpose is of the Journal and—let me add something new here—how it relates to the field of interreligious studies.

STEPHANIE: A common thread in our shared sense of mission has been an emphasis on learning and education—a belief that what we’re doing actually transforms people’s lives and communities. We’ve always published articles that were theoretical, more cerebral or abstract, because that’s part of an academic field, but whenever we talked about a call for submission, or about outreach, whenever we were weighing whether or not an individual submission was worthy of publishing, I think we’ve always tried to land on the side of increasing inclusivity and accessibility.

There was a period of time where some of the articles we were publishing weren’t as rigorous or as robust as they could have been. Sometimes that was because we were trying to reach out to

people who weren't in academia. We had a submission from a woman who was a quilter, and she had an interfaith quilt and wanted to submit a piece about it. Many academic, peer-reviewed publications wouldn't even open that e-mail--that's not how things get done, it's not what their people expect to read, right? Except, clearly this woman is doing interfaith work, and clearly she's amplifying the voices of members of her community, and clearly there's something here that is worth highlighting and sharing in some way.

So sometimes we really struggle with those kinds of submissions, or similarly, submissions from a small region in India or Malaysia, or a small African university. We'd think, well, clearly we should work with this person; we should see what they have to say, because we were always landing on the side of, "Yes. Open the door. Keep it open. Open it wider."

But the flip side is that if you're a reader, or a board member, or a faculty person looking to use our Journal in your courses, you might end up looking at those submissions and think, "Well, this is not as rigorous as I would expect from a peer-reviewed publication" or "Why is this in an academic journal?" That's a tension that we've had to name, talk about, and navigate. We're still working on it, but commitment to actual education and learning at all levels is a really strong strand in our mission.

CELENE: I think what Stephanie is capturing here is the line or balance between a commitment to building interreligious engagement at the grassroots and the commitment that the Journal has to thinking rigorously, theologically, academically, and historically about different modes of inter-religious engagement. It reflects both the practitioner and academic dimensions; it has both the grassroots and ivy tower dimensions. It's a hybrid in many ways.

OR: One way of thinking about this, which I think complements the other comments thus far, is that we hope we're cultivating a forum in which the theory and practice of interreligious studies is articulated thoughtfully, and in ways that will help inform different groups of people, including academics, organizational leaders, graduate students, and teachers, among others.

We recognize that in the last decade there has been a swell of interest, both on a popular grassroots level and within academic circles, in the question of people of different religious communities engaging--especially in the US context, which is highly diverse, and in a global context in which we are now interacting in ways we could have never imagined even a decade ago.

How do we begin to create a language and a discourse about those complexities and the opportunities for transformation intellectually, ethically, spiritually, and emotionally? That is another question, I think, at the heart of the Journal's work.

SUE: I wonder if there's been any ambivalence around this for those of you who are more situated in academia; on one hand, we're trying to make this the online journal of record for interreligious studies, and yet we also have this wide vision of inclusivity, of practitioner focus, of wanting to open the doors and widen the walls, How does that duality--or that two-pronged approach--play out for those of you especially committed to the academic positioning of the Journal, and even your own positions in academia?

JENNY: From my perspective, it's not so much of a tension as just an ongoing question. The Journal is evolving, and I think it has choices to make as it evolves. It goes back to Josh's and Stephanie's original vision for the Journal. What was the niche? Where was there a gap? With what were they trying to fill it? And how is that gap shifting? Does the Journal want to evolve with those changing needs?

There's a lot of potential in the Journal becoming the go-to place for people doing interreligious studies, as the new group within the AAR has added that language to the lexicon of academic circles. I think there's simply an increasing need for that, whether it's the Journal, or other multiple publications. In many ways, *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* is still the premier academic peer-reviewed journal in the field. I think having State of Formation as a companion publication takes a little of the pressure off the *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* in terms of having to be an "everything for everyone" sort of space. It was a great idea to create that second publication because it allows for that wide, wide door.

And then there is the development of the discourse, as the field continues to emerge. When the Journal was first formed, there weren't academic scholars who identified with the field of interreligious studies who could write scholarly articles in the same way. That's also continuing to emerge. So, again, for me it's not so much a tension, as an ongoing question we'll continue to answer together.

CELENE: Another aspect of that ongoing question takes us back to the question of language and terminology. The original title, with "inter-religious dialogue," stressed more the practitioner element; even just changing the name to "inter-religious studies" shifted much more to academic and analytic language. That can include reflection on best practices around dialogue, but it's certainly much broader because it's also about interreligious encounter, sometimes in ways that aren't deliberate in the ways that dialogue sets out to be. "Inter-religious studies" also includes the many ways in which different religious communities spontaneously bump up against one another, sometimes contentiously, sometimes collaboratively. The shift in language in the field, I think, has also helped to mainstream this area of inquiry into other branches of the social sciences and the humanities. "Studies" rather than "dialogue" broadens the context. The phrase "interreligious dialogue" evokes for me the image of heads of religious communities coming together in a public forum, and that's only one way in which dialogue or interreligious encounter occurs, and it's maybe not even the most important one.

JENNY: Right--there's much more dynamism that I think we as practitioners in this field see than just what takes place in formal, institutionally organized dialogues. The word "dialogue" seems to privilege deliberate encounters, and may suggest a sort of rarified institutional encounter at a certain elite level that's carefully cultivated.

But I want to note before we define "dialogue" too narrowly, that people like Len Swidler use it as a broad umbrella term. He talks about dialogue of the head, of the heart, and of the hand. Language gets proposed, and debated, and settled, and unsettled. But there are many people who use the term "dialogue" as broadly as we're trying to use the word "studies."

OR: I think it's also important to note that Celene's coming on as a co-director in 2014 has been important for the Journal's broad vision in a different way, both in terms of her own expertise in Islamic thought and practice, and her ability to connect us to people in the Muslim world who are practitioners and scholars of the interreligious encounter.

CELENE: I would also note, as we're talking about varieties of perspectives on and in the Journal, our recognition of the importance of the involvement of area experts, including but not only in our review process. In building out the board and in our other collaborations, we want to make sure that as we're thinking about the intersection points between different religious, ethical, and philosophical traditions, we're also doing due diligence with respect to the accuracy and authenticity of the portrayals.

SUE: One of the things that we've noted over time, even in my short tenure with the Journal, is both the need to keep expanding our panel of experts and reviewers to make sure that we're vetting content properly, as Celene noted, but also to be getting a wider range of voices represented in the pages of the Journal itself. With that as one example, I'd like to finish up our conversation by inviting you to reflect on what you see as other growing edges for the Journal, not only challenges and opportunities, but places where we need to push ourselves.

JOSH: One thing we need to do is to think carefully about the role of our board of scholars and practitioners, and how to make further use of the exceptional talents and expertise of that group. That's not a simple question, given the fact that the Journal is housed in one particular location with a board that is national in scope, and a board that is consciously constituted of people from different areas within interreligious studies and the interfaith movement, both academic and organizational.

STEPHANIE: Thinking about the board and the voices captured in the pages--it has been perennially difficult to include the voices of women, of people of color, and of those in lower socioeconomic classes. And that's true for State of Formation, as well. Often when we've been thinking about themed issues, or outreach, or how to grow the board, or who submits articles to us, this is something we keep grappling with; it's a challenge in the wider field as well.

One problem is that a lot of writers don't necessarily know or self-identify their own work as interreligious. I see a lot of articles or scholars, and think, "Oh, they could totally publish in the Journal," and they don't necessarily see their own work as fitting there. I often wished that I had ten hours a week just to devote to reaching out to writers and potential board members. That's definitely been a challenge, and a place where we haven't really succeeded yet. It's hard, because people that we do know who could be board members, because they're in previously underrepresented groups, may also be overcommitted and representing in too many places.

We need younger people who are in the field. And there's also the important question of economic access. This is a hard field for a poor person, or a first-generation college graduate, or a brand new faculty person to participate in because it's seen as optional; if you're trying to build your career or pay back student loans, how are you going to find the time to participate? We may need to think systemically about the ways in which exploring interfaith issues and religious diversity is, or is perceived as, a luxury.

JENNY: The area of growth that I would invite us to continue thinking about is to what extent will the Journal continue to respond to a genuine need, and how will we continue to keep it relevant and dynamic as this emerging area continues to shift, grow, and change in so many ways.

CELENE: For me, one primary challenge is our reach. We have about 40,000 in annual readership. It's a good start, but boosting those numbers is going to be important to get more visibility.

JOSH: Probably every year of our existence as a journal, as far as I can remember, we have felt like we were at an inflection point where there was going to be something new, or some big change, or a new addition, or a weaving together of what we're doing. We're still at it, and that's the reason we've been able to grow and change and be dynamic--we're always at that inflection point. So I'm excited to see what emerges, what grows, and what shifts.

It could be that more is better, and that we need another forum altogether. It could be that this is a year of further integration into the AAR. I'm kind of curious about the "how," not just the "what." I think reaching more people, integrating into other fields of study and connecting with them…there are so many things we can do and so many ways we can do them, and the "how" is the piece that I'm excited to hear about, because to me, therein lies the real innovation.

OR: For me, one of the core strengths of the Journal to date has been our collaborative model. While we are facing significant institutional changes at Hebrew College and Andover Newton, the dialogical spirit at the heart of this enterprise will continue to animate our work as we move forward.

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