Interreligious Formation: Reflecting on Co-Learning with the (Religiously) Other

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Theological education in the US has always enjoyed the privilege of its colonial nature and its Christian-centric and white-dominant curriculum and formation. For the most part, the theological education scene in the US is dominated by Christianity and thrives in denomination-affiliated spheres. While these situations serve well-intended purposes and goals, I want to challenge them and propose a different look at pastoral and religious leader formation for theological schools in the US.

Some of the goals for theological education institutions can be gathered and inferred by reading their mission statements. Almost all the mainline Protestant denominational and nondenominational seminaries include words such as "creative," "innovative," and "imaginative" to describe the types of leaders they want to produce. Most of them include serving the church and the world as their main mission.[1] The vast majority of the mainline Protestant seminaries in the US exist to educate and train Christian religious leaders, pastors, and activists for the church and the world. For many theological institutions, the stakeholders are often affiliated with a denomination and bear the responsibility to uphold and maintain its in-

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stitutional values and relationships. One of the problems with these institutional goals and purposes is that the world for which theological institutions prepare their students is no longer religious or faith-based. The world is becoming more "spiritual but not religious," and the graduates of these Christian institutions must be able to navigate through and lead others in a less church-centered world. I generally see two possible responses to this complex problem: meet the people where they are or lead the people to meet where the church is. I believe the route many of us have taken is somewhere in between. In this article, I want to briefly discuss the route in between and propose an aspect of theological formation we often do not discuss explicitly, at least not in mainline Christian seminaries: interreligious formation.[2]

Interreligious formation focuses on the participants' posture rather than proving competency and mastery of religious literacy, which includes doctrines, practices, history, and theology. Religion is not a set of doctrines or beliefs; it is not about practicing those beliefs; it is not even about the divinity. In fact, religions represent "those who adhere to God," and not necessarily God since religions are formed by people who respond a certain way to life.[3] Reducing religions down to a set of beliefs, the divinity, and practices is doing it an injustice, and the idea of competency for people's lived experiences in culture and with the divine seems senseless. Therefore, interreligious formation cannot be focused on competency or mastery but on cultivating a posture that welcomes curiosity, practices hospitality, encourages transformation, and opens ourselves to imaginative possibility.

What is Interreligious Formation?

While I was attending Union Theological Seminary in New York City, I took an interreligious education course with students from three different theological schools in New York City: Union, Hebrew Union College, and New York Theological Seminary. This course was carefully crafted to expose the students to many aspects of interreligious relations and challenged us to interact with people of other religions on a personal level. We were assigned to form small groups that included Christian and Jewish students and visited sacred worship spaces and participated in sacred rituals (such as Sabbath). In my group, we had mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. We sought out different churches and temples to visit and participated in four or five worship services. During the semester, we attended a Seder

service, a Shabbat dinner, a Maundy Thursday service, and a Good Friday service and were able to participate as much as our comfort level allowed. This was the beginning of my journey into interreligious relations, but I come back to this experience as a formative period in my spiritual and academic journey. These brief and seemingly depthless visits to sacred spaces of worship forever shaped me to always include interreligious components in my ministry.

The formative part of this experience was not visiting these places and participating in the rituals and prayers. It was the organic occurrences that ensued following these visits as we sat down with coffee or tea to debrief what we saw, heard, and experienced with our whole beings. The interpersonal relationships that formed as we engaged in deep reflection *together* in the presence of one another opened a pathway to a life-changing and transformative journey. In the conversations, it became evident that we were in each other's intimate spaces and were becoming more curious about the other, not as ascribers to certain faiths but as people with different outlooks in life. Religions became less about the doctrine and the divine but more about the people who practiced these doctrines and followed the divine. Being in the presence of one another and engaging in conversations about life, faith, and values made the time and space we occupied together sacred. Stemming from these visits, reflections, and conversations, we started to invite one another to our personal sacred spaces; I was invited to Shabbat dinners in my group members' homes, and I shared with them my visions and dreams in life and invited them to celebrate and struggle with me in the challenges and successes of ministry and my academic journey. This was possible because we invited each other into our homes, an intimate and sacred space.

For the guest, whether they are a first-time visitor or not, each experience has something new to offer and new questions to foster. For the host, there is an interesting amalgamation of excitement and anxiety about sharing the space they call home and consider sacred. In these conversations we became aware of the dynamics of vulnerability and protection as we opened our intimate spaces to others and possibly to their critique. Theoretically, this exercise was simple and benign; we visit and reflect. We were confident and sufficiently grounded in our own traditions to withstand questions and challenges. Furthermore, we were enlightened enough to be open to embrace and participate in other traditions. However, in practice,

we were deeply protective of our own traditions and practices and highly suspicious of others'. One's religious beliefs or spiritual outlook can be the grounds on which one builds one's life and sharing the space in which these beliefs and practices come alive requires one to leave ample room for negotiation within both the self and the group. We all came into this exercise guarded and with many biases. However, learning demands transformation, which can be both life-giving and painful. With this sentiment, we began to see changes, loss, and gain. The pain was in seeing and realizing how flawed our own communities were and how far away from what God may have intended human faith communities to be. More specifically, it was painful to be made aware of how insular and self-centered my mainline Christian community was; it was not surprising, but it became quite evident when we were in the presence of the other.

Life-Giving Dialogue

One of the life-giving aspects of interreligious formation is that all parties involved can engage in deep reflection together on meaning, knowledge, values, and practices that are rooted in faith traditions and beliefs. My small group at Union was not focused on religious literacy or learning about the logic behind each other's traditions; we were not focused on religious tolerance or peace-building efforts; in fact, there were no explicit goals. Many interreligious encounters are called "interreligious dialogue," and interreligious formation is a byproduct of dialogue. Dialogue is different from conversations or debates in that it calls for "a common participation, in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other."[4] More often than not, interreligious activities lead either to finding the least common denominator to avoid offending any religious tradition or to competing and debating to find the right outlook and theology in life. However, dialogue is a type of communication that minimizes competition.

Dialogue has one main goal: to let new meaning emerge. In the case of interreligious formation, dialogue is the main mode through which formation occurs. Engaging in theological reflection with those who are religiously other means that, at some level, the reflection must be communicated with words. Much reflection takes place internally in a person. We think thoughts, and these thoughts open pathways for more and different thoughts. Processing these thoughts externally with other people who may

go through similar processes requires us to form coherent phrases and sentences with tone and gestures to convey what our thoughts mean. And the process of thinking is not passive because "almost everything around us has been determined by thought."[5] Thus, to communicate such thoughts, especially regarding one's religion and belief systems, is a monumental task.

Communication is a holistic expression of one's thoughts, emotions, and intuition and is filtered through our own biases and prejudices. Communication, according to David Bohm, a prominent scientist whose research expanded to the philosophy of mind, "is making something in common, i.e., creating something new together."[6] Through interreligious communication, human beings create something new together despite their own biases and prejudices. This is only possible when participants in a dialogue are aware of their own biases and are able to suspend their judgment while engaged in a dialogue with others. Interreligious formation requires its participants to interact with one another with the awareness that they may "hear the other through the screen of [their] own thoughts" and to actively and intentionally suspend their biases.[7] In my experience, this was the most difficult and inorganic part of interreligious formation because the act of intentionally suspending one's judgment is not natural for humans; however, we must make the effort to be open to new and different perspectives. In my personal experience, when I give full attention by actively listening to what others are communicating, I am able to lift the screen of my own thoughts and authentically open myself up to new and sometimes challenging ideas. Communicating with much self-awareness by all participants leads to layers and the creation of new meaning.

Dialogue, as an integral part of interreligious formation, is a constructive activity that both challenges and builds knowledge. Engaging in a dialogue with others moves participants to question their own assumptions and to challenge the status quo by experiencing contrast. One of the pressures that shapes and forms our identity is becoming aware of others who are different; identity is formed by ruling out who we are not.[8] The complexity of interreligious formation is that we understand that "even our broadest and deepest particular experiences are limited" and that opening up to new thoughts and perspectives on our own beliefs and assumptions can be dangerous.[9] Sometimes this complexity is dangerously constructive. Learning changes us. Interactions change us. And this change adds layers to our understanding of meaning and knowledge that will give life to new things.

Jennifer Howe Peace, a prominent interreligious educator, coined the term "'coformation' . . . to assert that students are not formed in isolation but in connection to a dynamic web of relationships."[10] In coformation, the interconnected web of life is highlighted in forming the whole person holistically. She emphasizes the fact that interreligious and nonreligious communities must be part of a seminarian's formation and argues that "making formation an intentionally interfaith process reflects the reality that our particular beliefs exist in a larger and complex multireligious human community."[11] Many human relationships shape and form seminarians, but intentionally interreligious engagements add a dimension that typically does not happen in one's own community.

My practice and pedagogy of interreligious formation go beyond coformation as the cultivating of relationships and add to it the formation of seminarians as co-creators of new meaning, knowledge, and modes of being as religious leaders in the world. Interreligious formation includes not only coformation but also the transforming of one's own belief systems and faith to create new meaning and knowledge. Bohm's definition of communication is lived out in interreligious formation. The idea of creating and building meaning and knowledge together places accountability on all parties; everyone is responsible for creating the building blocks and constructing them together. The members of my small group at Union had a mutual understanding that we were fully responsible for what we brought into the group and what we co-created as the result of the dialogue. The fruits of our dialogue, however, were different depending on the participant as each of us came from particular contexts to which we returned, although we were not the same when we returned to our community.

What Does Interreligious Formation Accomplish?

Interreligious engagement in theological education can serve multiple purposes. First of all, institutionally, many seminaries make a commitment to train their students to master intercultural and interreligious engagement. For the purpose of intercultural and interreligious competency, institutions generally provide sensitivity training teeming with different religious doctrines and practices to avoid conflicts with our American Christian ways of being. Secondly, some theological faculty are involved in activism around social justice issues, and their courses are naturally de-

signed to include interfaith engagements with social justice. Students are guided to turn their attention to the communities outside of their Christian communities and collaborate with those who are religiously other. This type of engagement serves only the students enrolled in the courses taught by certain faculty. Lastly, theological institutions may join other religious groups to hold interreligious prayers and worship. Prayer and worship create community around spiritual practices, but the interreligious nature creates dynamics that limit the participants from fully engaging with the other. There are uncertainties around religious integrity in cross-participating in rituals, prayers, and worship. Interreligious formation's goal is to move beyond these engagements with the religiously other to genuine and organic encounters that lead participants to take on open postures that welcome hospitality and encourage curiosity.

Cultivating postures that draw out honest and authentic encounters in interreligious formation begets interreligious intelligences that defy Christian normative understanding and practices. Interreligious intelligence must be framed in terms of curiosity as we genuinely seek to understand "how different people, cultures, and homelands understand what intelligence looks, sounds, feels, and tastes like."[12] Being curious about another person and their community does not have a utilitarian goal, just as dialogue seeks to collaborate without a competitive spirit. Curiosity denotes a sense of openness and willingness to learn, observe, participate, and engage in a lived experience that is not part of one's own experience. In the open posture made possible by curiosity, our students gain agility in leadership and find ways to break open pathways for those they lead. Christian congregations still struggle with interreligious engagements and relationships. Not many religious leaders have modeled for their congregation members a good understanding of what interreligious engagements look like. Fostering a culture of curiosity in local congregations requires much intentionality from the leadership and more modeling of how curiosity works in world.

Lack of curiosity in Christian pastoral leadership has led to many churches in the US becoming complacent and almost stagnant in their ministries as the vast majority of churches in the US historically have been white-dominant and Christian-centric. Yes, Christian churches need to be Christian; however, as a church builds its own identity, it needs to understand its context in the larger society. For centuries, the Christian church at large has thrived and enjoyed sociocultural support, but the sociocul-

tural scene in the US has been changing in both slow and rapid ways to become more secular and more spiritual but not religious. As Diane Eck, a prominent religious studies scholar, noted twenty years ago, America is becoming more pluralistic than ever before.[13] However, Christian pastors still preach to their congregations as if everyone in the US understands God to be the Judeo-Christian God and as if there is only one type of Christianity: white Christianity. This is not the case anymore. Even before Eck published her groundbreaking book, the balance of American Christianity had been shifting toward non-white and immigrant faith communities. Within Christianity, we are seeing much diversity in expression and cultural embodiment outside of the white normative, let alone interreligious and secular engagements.

Thus, interreligious formation is necessary to decenter and liberate religious leaders from white Christianity and shape them to honor lived experiences outside of the white, American, Christian normative. Developing interreligious sensibilities through interpersonal relationships, we learn and understand power and beauty that exist "outside of a relationship with narratives of the dominant culture and religion."[14] This allows us to see non-American and non-Christian ways of practicing faith and living into and out of faith. These encounters can function as pressure points to hone our own identities as a part of the bigger religious landscape in our world. Decentering the white Christian narrative and culture in our faith communities starts with genuine curiosity, and it will strengthen our faith communities internally as they engage with faith communities outside of their own. Our identities are shaped and solidified by seeing and interacting with those who are different from us.

Interreligious formation both strengthens religious identity and blurs the boundaries that demarcate it. Religious identity is not a stagnant state of being. It is fluid and yet concrete. Religions and how they work in and through humans complicate the way we see and define religious identity. Firestone describes religions in terms of a "range of thinking" that includes "almost everything."[15] He says that religions

are both inward-looking and outward-looking. They reflect a powerful need for hierarchy, yet they are often extremely anti-hierarchical. They react to threat and conflict with an assortment of responses, from extreme violence to radical nonviolence. They lean sometimes toward universalism and

sometimes toward particularism. These vectors or trajectories of thought and practice are the very essence of religion.[16]

Religious formation teaches its adherents to find a careful balance in this range of thinking that seems contradictory and chaotically confusing at times and absolutely affirming at other times. Through this messiness, religious identity is challenged, tested, affirmed, and solidified. It requires much fluidity of perspective to firm up our religious identities. The relationship between fluidity and solidity of religious identity is complex and intertwined, so much so that we cannot discuss one without the other. It is not something that is ever solidified or set but is in a constant state of evolution and formation. For us to claim some sort of religious identity, we must experience, be taught, and understand both cognitively and in practice what it means to be a part of a religious community. But even the deepest understanding of a religion is limited without the context of the larger society and culture in which we embody this religion. Religious identity is embodied, and this embodiment of faith cannot be neatly fixed into categories. In a pluralistic society, it is even more evident that to solidify one's religious identity, one must be in conversations with and in communion with those who are religiously other.

Therefore, practicing hospitality and carefully navigating the host-guest relationship will shape us to assume an open posture that allows fluidity to see the blurred boundaries of religious practices and communities. A part of interreligious formation is cross-participation in rituals and sacred services. When I hosted my small group at my church, I knew that my mainline Protestant community would welcome non-Christians to the Eucharist table as well as the benediction in the name of Jesus. Formation takes place as the host becomes aware of the spiritual implications of their sacred rituals in the presence of the guest because in these moments of invitation and openness, the host must know the fine and fluid line that holds them accountable for bringing an outsider in. We learn to better understand where and what these fine lines are in the presence of the other. When we open our sacred spaces for others to join and worship together, the same worship that we have been participating in for years feels new and different. This difference in worshipping with the religiously other has much to do with creating space for the old to be transformed into the new because of their presence. The essence of being a host is the intentionality of carving out space and

energy for something new and unknown that can be life-changing and life-giving but also can be detrimental if the host is not prepared.

Similar processes take place for the guests as they are invited to participate in the rituals and worship services of a different religion. Guests need to be aware of what they can participate in, experience, and endorse "before crossing a line that violates their fidelity to their home community or their own sense of identity."[17] Just like hosts, guests must be open, be curious, be grounded. When we are invited into each other's sacred spaces, we are invited to open ourselves up to what the spirit of interreligious encounters can do and walk on the journey together, and then we are led to experience powerful transformation. So, when we experience something new and possibly uncomfortable, we must remain open to new and unexpected emotions. It is someone else's sacred that is being shared. We must assume an attitude of humility and mutuality.

In this host-guest relationship, with both sides sensing and practicing hospitality, new and transformative dialogue takes place. Dialogue is a type of communication that creates something new together as participants share and make something in common.[18] Dialogue does not necessitate words or partners. Dialogue can happen internally and in shared experiences as all parties recognize something creative has taken place. This dialogue group is not a discussion group where the main task is to analyze and break up to support your position; it is to leave an empty space for something to emerge.[19] In this empty space, no conclusion is made as it is left open and free; everyone remains open to the uncertainty and possibility. Both parties must remain open to unexpected and unpredictable emotions and experiences. A powerful aspect of cross-participation in multiple religious traditions is that all participants have a shared experience together and these experiences lead to "shared emotions which places all of us on the same page even though we may interpret and understand the divine differently."[20] This shared emotion is powerful and inexplicable and is better left unexplained. However, the shared emotions lead to stronger bonds between those who shared these moments. Whether we participate as simply "participating outsider[s]" [21] or as fully engaged pluralists with multiple religious identities, cross-participation in interreligious formation broadens and deepens our understanding and faith in the divine. We find this transformative in theological training because it compels us to expand our ideas

and images of the divine beyond what is normative for mainline Christians in the West.

Conclusion

When I entered Union Theological Seminary, I initially expected to see, feel, and experience Jesus in ways with which I was comfortable. As a good Presbyterian, I was sure of Jesus's presence there, and I was equally skeptical I would find Jesus explicitly since the program was focused on interreligious relations. How naïve and biased it was to think that Jesus would not be a part of these relations. To my surprise, I found Jesus in my interreligious small groups, in my interactions with those who identified as agnostics or secularists, and in my conversations with those who were spiritual but not religious. Then I realized that I was being broken open; this image is evocative even now because I felt as if I was physically being broken open and released. My sense of normal was evolving. My religious identities were transforming. My idea of God was expanding. Interreligious formation may take place at any point in one's faith journey, and it will lead to transformation. Those involved in interreligious formation will experience deep transformation from both within and without.

Interreligious formation is not a novel concept, but it is something that has been less explicitly expressed in seminaries as a part of formation. To carry out the mission of training, educating, and forming religious leaders capable of both carrying out the Christian gospel and meeting the needs of the world in innovative ways, we must include interreligious formation in all its liberative and transformative aspects. Our world demands religious leaders be agile enough to adapt to the changing world spiritually, emotionally, physically, and technologically. Therefore, our institutions must be forward thinking and must review our curricula in terms of shaping the types of leaders the world needs. Interreligious formation will strengthen our religious literacy, solidify our religious identity, and break us open to be more fluid, blurring religious boundaries and inviting us to experience transformative formation.

NOTES

1 Some of the websites I looked at to gather this information were those of Duke Divinity School, Lexington Theological Seminary, Candler School of Theology, Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and Columbia Theological Seminary.

2 There are distinctions between interreligious, interfaith, and non-faith-based groups, but I am using "interreligious" broadly to refer to all communities and worldviews that may or may not be faith-based. I choose interreligious because many formal theological institutions are religious and affiliated with religious institutions and the focus of this article is learning in the presence of students and practitioners of religious beliefs. I do, however, acknowledge that interreligious formation should and must include those whose traditions are not necessarily faith-based (e.g., some sects of Buddhism, atheism, and secularism).

3 Reuven Firestone, "Interreligious Learning as Monotheist Imperative," in *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy*, ed. Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell (Boston: Brill, 2020), 40.

4 David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 7.

5 Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 11.

6 Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 3.

7 Bohm, *On Dialogue*, 3.

8 Jennifer Howe Peace, "Religious Self, Religious Other: Coformation as a Model for Interreligious Education," in *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy*, ed. Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell (Boston: Brill, 2020), 201.

9 Firestone, "Interreligious Learning," 42.

10 Jennifer Howe Peace, "Coformation through Interreligious Learning," *Colloquy* 20, no. 1 (2011): 27.

11 Peace, "Coformation," 27.

12 Christine Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 16.

13 Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 3.

14 Hong, *Decolonial Futures*, 16

15 Firestone, "Interreligious Learning," 41.

16 Firestone, "Interreligious Learning," 41.

17 Mark S. Heim, "On Doing What Others Do: Intentions and Intuitions in Multiple Religious Practices," in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*, ed. Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 19.

18 Bohm, *On Dialogue,* 3.

19 Bohm, *On Dialogue,* 19.

20 Yossi K. Halevi, A*t the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for Hope with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 104.

21 Walter Van Herck, "Enlightened Presuppositions of (Spiritually Motivated) Cross-Ritual Participation," in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*, ed. Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 43.