

5 The Challenge of World Religions to Christian Faith and Practice at Drew University School of Theology

S. Wesley Ariarajah

Editor's Introduction

“**The Challenge of World Religions**” is one of six cases studies from *Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue*.¹ Volume II in the Hartford Seminary Series on Innovation in Theological Education.

The book, as its name and the series name suggests, is about teaching, interfaith dialogue and theological education. The core of the book: six critical case studies of seminary taught, degree courses in interfaith dialogue. The cases give expression to a broad range of dialogical pedagogies and course formats, and they include the courses' syllabi and bibliographies. Each case course includes an experience of dialogue as part of the course. This is definitive of the project, for reasons elaborated below.

By critical case we mean one that describes not only the context, content, methods and related goals and rationale of the course, but also presents an evaluation of the course and discussion of the implications of the evaluation for teaching interfaith dialogue in theological institutions. Our hope for the book: To create a practical literature and related conversation among theological educators on the role of interfaith dialogue in a seminary curriculum, and on the substantive and structural issues related to it.

The cases are first hand accounts, written by the teachers themselves -- all veteran theological educators. With the support of a

grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to Hartford Seminary, the group gathered several times between February 2007 and September 2008. The initial times together were spent getting to know each other, discussing our experiences, our approaches to and philosophies about interfaith dialogue and the pedagogical resources that we use in teaching it, and developing a common sense of the kind of critical case the project desired. Beginning in September 2007, each person presented a first draft of their case based on a course they taught during the time of the project. Case presentations extended over several sessions of discussion, critique and deepening reflection on the nature and location of dialogue in theological education. Christy Lohr, whose integrative essay joins the cases in this volume, joined the case writer group during the case review period of the project.

With revised, final drafts in hand, the case writer group convened two meetings to discuss the cases with seminary faculty more broadly. The meetings took place in Berkeley and Chicago. Invitations were extended to all seminary faculty in the respective areas to engage two or three of the project cases, share the work they themselves were doing and engage each other in substantive conversation. The meetings intended and accomplished several purposes. Foremost was to begin to disseminate the results of the project in a way that both advocated a central role for interfaith dialogue within the theological curriculum and laid a foundation for ongoing critical engagement among seminary faculty of the theory, theology and the practice; and to do so in a dialogical way.

Our thanks to the sixty or so faculty who shared in our journey at the regional meetings. Thanks also to the Hartford Seminary faculty who indulged our interim reflections at several of their regular Wednesday Collegial Sharing luncheons along the way; and to Sheryl Wiggins and David Barrett for their general assistance. Most importantly, our deepest felt thanks to the case writers for their willingness to dialogue with us and with each other about a personal passion, and for their willingness to ultimately present their passion in published form to their peers; to the Wabash Center for their continuing support through the several interesting twists in the project's unfolding; to Alexa Lindauer who copy-edited the entire manuscript; and to the many, many students in the case courses. Dialogue is about mutuality. Thank you students for your gift to us.

¹ David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell, eds. (Hartford Seminary, 2009).

Why this Book at this Time

September 11, 2001 got America's attention. Tragic – in so many ways. Earth shattering – in so many ways. World changing – in so many ways. Among the latter, as one of us shared at the annual meeting of the Religion News Writers Association less than two weeks later, the shift from an *Ecumenical to Interfaith Consciousness about America's Religious Diversity*.

Critical to the point is that this shift is about awareness and acknowledgement, not a sudden change in presence or numbers. Muslims have been in North America since the beginning of our history with slavery, and adherents of Islam and a variety of Asian religions have been increasing steadily since changes to immigration laws nearly 50 years ago. The relative lack of acknowledgement of the multi-faith reality in the United States prior to September 11 is suggested, for example, by the fact that a major survey of congregations in the U.S. conducted in 2000 found that while 45% of congregations were involvement in ecumenical Christian worship in the year prior to the survey, only 7% indicated involvement in interfaith worship (and much of this was Christian/Jewish).

The multi-faith character of American society would be, of course, no surprise to theological educators. Indeed, in an essay on "Globalization, World Religions and Theological Education" in the "Looking Toward the Future" section of the 1999 volume of *Theological Education* celebrating the conclusion of Association of Theological Education's decade of globalization (Vol 35, No 2, pp 143-153), M. Thangaraj explicitly recognizes that, "Dialogue across religious boundaries has become a daily activity in many people's lives." His conclusion and plead: an increased engagement with world religions is critical for Christian theological education for three reasons. A Christian minister cannot have an adequate theological grounding for his or her faith without a meaningful understanding of how it relates to other faith traditions. A minister cannot adequately address the everyday interfaith experience and practice of his or her laity. Public ministry in today's world is increasingly interfaith.

World and national events since September 2001 have only intensified awareness of Muslims and Islam in particular and multi-faith diversity more broadly in the United States. Public opinion polls suggest both encouraging and discouraging developments. American attitudes toward American Muslims are a bit more positive today than

nine years ago and American congregations' involvement in interfaith worship has more than doubled since the 2000. In contrast, American attitudes toward Islam as a religion are less positive today and the dominant approaches of congregations to interfaith issues appear to remain indifference and avoidance.

Against this background of increasing awareness, increased necessity (assuming tolerance across diversity is a good thing), and increased lay and congregational involvement in interfaith engagement, one might think that a subject like Interfaith Dialogue (as a vehicle for tolerance through enhanced understanding and connection) would be a hot-bed of interest in theological education, or at least a begrudging capitulation to reality. The evidence is, unfortunately, less compelling. For example, one will not find a single article in *Theological Education* about interfaith dialogue between September 2001 and January 2007, when the case authors in this volume first met; indeed, not since the conclusion of the ATS decade of globalization in 1999; and in fact, not since the journal's inception in 1964! Nor have there been any to date (through Vol 44, No 2, 2009). This is all the more ironic given the centrality of "diversity" to ATS priorities and, relatedly, to issues of *Theological Education*. Tellingly, the one article in *Theological Education* that contains "Dialogue" in its title is about black and latino theologies (Vol 38, No 2, 2002, p 87-109).

A survey of seminary deans and an online search of seminary catalogues done in fall, 2006 to help identify possible seminary courses for this book was only a little more dialogically-friendly than *Theological Education*. The good news is that we were able to find several courses that fit our criteria. The bad news was that there were only a few more than the five seminaries represented in the book that offered degree courses taught by regular faculty that included an experience of interfaith dialogue.

This certainly fit our impressions. As we looked out across theological education in the United States we found that although there seemed to be a lot of talk about and enthusiasm for interfaith dialogue, there was a paucity of courses related to interfaith dialogue in even the broadest sense, and very few places in which interfaith dialogue was actually happening. There was, from our vantage point, a curricular and pedagogical vacuum that badly needed to be filled.

More encouraging, at first glance, was our discovery of an entire section of syllabi listed under Interreligious Dialogue on the

Wabash Center Guide to Internet Resources For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. Unfortunately, a quick perusal in June 2007 indicated that an actual conversation or encounter with a person of another faith tradition was not a goal of a single course listed; and that learning about the practice of putting persons from different faith traditions into conversation or dialogue with each other was a goal of, at most, one of the courses. Among other things this means that from among the half dozen or so different types of interreligious dialogue typical of the emerging literature on the subject, the cutting edge of university and seminary courses on dialogue listed on the Wabash site all narrowly focused on a single, and typically the most rudimentary, purpose. In terms of the following list of types of dialogue, for example, the Wabash site syllabi all fall into "Informational," although several move beyond basic comparative religions to also include the history of relations between two or more faith tradition.

- 1) Informational: Acquiring of knowledge of the faith partner's religious history, founding, basic beliefs, scriptures, etc.
- 2) Confessional: Allowing the faith partners to speak for and define themselves in terms of what it means to live as an adherent.
- 3) Experiential: Dialogue with faith partners from within the partner's tradition, worship and ritual - entering into the feelings of one's partner and permitting that person's symbols and stories to guide.
- 4) Relational: Develop friendships with individual persons beyond the "business" of dialogue.
- 5) Practical: Collaborate to promote peace and justice.
[http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Interfaith_dialogue/guidelines_interfaith.php#goals]

Such narrow and elementary approaches, we believe, cannot adequately address the three reasons set forth by Thangaraj almost a decade ago for why the increased engagement of interfaith issues is critical for theological education. Rather, we believe, theological education can only meet these challenges for its ministry students and related congregations and denominations by exposing students to the full range of dialogical purposes. Hence, our desire for the book to create a practical literature and related conversation among theological

educators on the role of the practice of interfaith dialogue in a seminary curriculum is driven by the related desire to be a constructive advocate for courses in Interfaith Dialogue using pedagogies that optimize the full range of dialogical purposes and practices. To use ATS outcome language: we want to enhance the capacity of seminaries to equip their students to engage the multi-faith reality of the American (and global) context in ways that advance mutual understanding and appreciative relationships across faith traditions.

The Cases

The desire to maximize the diversity of dialogical pedagogies, course formats, Christian traditions represented within the Association of Theological Schools, and regions of the country in a limited number of case courses at first struck us as rather daunting. One of the few positives of discovering that we really had a very limited number of courses from which to draw was that it made the selection process considerably easier. Eventually we gathered an experienced group of theological educators from three regions of the country that included professors from Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, and ecumenical schools, as well as from three religious traditions – Christian, Jewish and Muslim.

The six case studies, along with a very brief summary of each, are listed below in the order they appear in the book. The cases are preceded in the book by an integrative essay that further comments on each case's distinctiveness and connects the cases to a broader examination of the issues and potential location of interfaith dialogue in North American theological education: ***Navigating the New Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in Theological Education***, Christy Lohr, Intersections Institute, Eastern Cluster of Lutheran Seminaries.

'Interreligious Dialogue' at the Jesuit School of Theology, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, James Redington, St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia

The *'Interreligious Dialogue'* course at the Jesuit School of Theology, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, combines a substantive course on the history of and current approaches to dialogue with in-class exercises in meditation and a required experience of

dialogue. It includes sections on Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, emphasizing the latter two in the dialogue requirement. It appears first because it includes a succinct overview of the history of and current approaches to dialogue; it alerts the reader to the importance of spiritual practices for the experiential/relational practice of dialogue (a common thread across the courses), and uses, arguably, the simplest approach for students to be in dialogue – go find your own experience and then run it by the professor.

***World Religions and Christianity: A Global Perspective in the Context of the Overall Program of Theological Education at Perkins School of Theology*, Robert Hunt.**

The *World Religions and Christianity* case presents what we believe is the most typical current approach among seminaries for dealing with the challenge of interfaith dialogue – specifically grafting dialogue onto an existing course in world religions. Interfaith Dialogue’s tension with evangelical Christianity is a visible dynamic in the case. For the course’s required experience of dialogue, students are assigned to external Hindu, Jewish and Muslim organizations pre-arranged by the Professor. In addition to the course dynamic the case includes an insightful overview of the interfaith practice of a wide spectrum of religious organization in the Dallas area.

***Building Abrahamic Partnerships: A Model Interfaith Program at Hartford Seminary*, Yehezkel Landau**

The *Building Abrahamic Partnerships* case documents a very different kind of course than either of the first two. It is an eight-day intensive for which an equal number of degree and non-degree Christians, Jews and Muslims from around the US are recruited, with priority to Hartford Seminary students. The eight days are a continual experience of dialogue aimed at developing basic concepts and skills for leadership in building Abrahamic partnerships. The course and case are especially strong in the breadth of dialogical methods used and on the relational skills required of the course leadership.

***The Challenge of World Religions to Christian Faith and Practice at Drew University School of Theology*, S. Wesley Ariarajah**

The *Challenge of World Religions* case is more broadly about Drew’s three course curriculum addressing interfaith issues. The three courses include a heavily experiential world religions course with personal engagements with Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism; a relatively straight forward theology of religions course; and an international, cross-cultural immersion focused on interfaith encounter. Although the world religions course is highlighted in the case, the author’s reflection on the systemic inter-relationships among and distinctive contributions of each of the three courses is a unique contribution of the case. Another unique contribution is the treatment given to the international immersion course and how this popular course format can be adapted to addressing interfaith issues. Still another distinctive of the case is the extensive attention given to student reflections of their experiences.

***Theological Education for Interfaith Engagement: The Philadelphia Story*, J. Paul Rajashekar, The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.**

The *Philadelphia Story* (Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia), like the Drew case, strongly situates interfaith concerns within the overall curriculum. A distinctive feature of the case is the strong argument the author, who was dean during a recent curriculum revision and who is a systematic theologian, makes for the necessity of Christian theology to move from a “self-referential” to a “cross-referential” posture in its method, hermeneutic and articulation. The case then moves to its focal course concern with the required, Theory and Practice of Interfaith Dialogue. A distinctive strength of the case’s treatment of the course is its critical struggle with the pros and cons of having students “find and direct their own” dialogue experience.

***Dialogue in a World of Difference: Turning Necessity into Opportunity in Hartford Seminary’s Master of Arts Program*, Suendam Birinci, Heidi Hadsell, and David Roozen.**

The *Dialogue in a World of Difference* case is the only one about a course that is not a part of an MDiv curriculum. Rather, the course is

an attempt to use a semester long experience of interfaith dialogue taken during a student's first semester to socialize students into the relational and appreciative skills, capacities and preferences that will help them maximize learning in the seminary's religiously and culturally diverse MA student body. Three distinctive features of the course/case are the near equal mix of international and US students in the class, the near equal mix of Christian and non-Christian students in the course; and the near equal mix of religious professionals and laity. The case also reports on a less than successful experiment with online dialogue.

About the Editors

Heidi Hadsell is President of Hartford Seminary and Professor of Social Ethics. She is former Director, The Ecumenical Institute of The World Council of Churches Bossey, Switzerland and former Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty at McCormick Theological Seminary. She has served as a consultant to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches – Roman Catholic Dialogue; consultant for institutional change towards the globalization of theological education, Pilot Immersion Project for the Globalization of Theological Education, and consultant for curriculum design and organizational structure, Pilot Master's degree program for Public Administrators, Institute for Technical and Economic Planning, Florianopolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.

David Roozen is Director of the Hartford Seminary Institute for Religion Research and Professor of Religion and Society. More widely recognized for his work in congregational studies and religious trends, Roozen also has an extensive record of research and publication on theological education, including, for example: *Changing The Way Seminaries Teach*. David A. Roozen, Alice Frazer Evans and Robert A. Evans (Plowshares Institute, 1996); *Interfaith FACT's: An Invitation to Dialogue*. Martin Bailey and David A. Roozen (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2003); "Patterns of Globalization: Six Case Studies," guest editor, *Theological Education* (Spring, 1991); and, *The Globalization of Theological Education*. Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans and David A. Roozen (eds) (Orbis Books, 1993).

5 The Challenge of World Religions to Christian Faith and Practice at Drew University School of Theology

S. Wesley Ariarajah

Introduction

The much re-visited statement, "The only way to be religious in our day is to be inter-religious" speaks volumes to the changes that have taken place in interreligious relations over the past several decades. The increasing religious diversity of most nations, increase in movements of populations, rapid progress in communication technologies, growing mutual interdependence of nations and peoples have pushed religious communities to the point where they dare not continue to live in mutual isolation or in ignorance of one another's beliefs and practices.

That challenges does this new reality bring to the majority Christian population of the country, to the churches, to their self-understandings, to their understanding of others, and especially to their relationship with their new neighbors? More significantly, what challenges do they present to seminaries that prepare students for the diverse ministries in churches and the wider community? And more specifically, what are the courses that need to be added to meet this challenge? How must they be taught? And what goals we should seek to achieve?

What follows is an account of the assumptions, directions, programs and courses that are in place to address this issue at the Drew University School of Theology.

Location

Drew University is situated in Madison, New Jersey. Even though many parts of New Jersey are rich in ethnic and religious diversity, Madison itself is a rich, white suburb. The Theological School is part of the University that also has a College of Liberal Arts of some two thousand students and a Graduate School. The College of Liberal Arts draws students from all parts of New Jersey and from outside the state, giving it the ethnic and religious diversity not found in the town of Madison, which is predominantly Christian with a significant Jewish population. The College of Liberal Arts has strong Christian, Jewish and Islamic students associations and a multi-faith Chaplaincy program that organizes interfaith encounters and events to mark significant religious holidays of the three religious communities. The College also has a strong Religious Studies department and a Center for Holocaust Studies. In other words, even though the town of Madison does not provide significant religious diversity to the Theological School, the university campus, of which it is a part, is sufficiently diverse to keep interfaith dialogue as an important concern. Both New Jersey and the adjoining city of New York have several local interfaith organizations and dialogue groups that regularly organize interfaith encounters, interfaith educational opportunities and events. Several townships within driving distance to Madison have Mosques, Synagogues, Sikh Gurdwaras, and Buddhist, Hindu and Jain temples. This means that any interested student would be able to be in contact with a religious community or communities other than his or her own.

Nature of the Student Body

Drew School of Theology is a Methodist seminary in the country, but both its faculty and student body are drawn from the full spectrum of the main branches and denominations of the Church. Further, students come from all parts of the country and from a number of theological streams. Even though the Seminary has the reputation of being “Progressive” or “Liberal”, many students from the mainline evangelical churches, evangelically inclined Baptist and African American churches opt for Drew. A sizable international student body, mainly from North East Asian countries with evangelical formation, also come to Drew. Most students (with rare notable exceptions) come with little or no knowledge of what neighbors of other

religious traditions believe in and practice, and with hardly any experience of engaging in interfaith dialogue.

At the same time, it is most likely that they will go back to ministerial situations that will increasingly require them to be involved in wider multi-faith communities. Those who eventually become hospital chaplains and social workers will be called upon to minister to persons of many religious traditions. It is very likely that some members in their parishes and congregations are engaged in spiritual practices like yoga, meditation, interfaith retreats etc. and would want to ask questions of them about the implications of adopting spiritual practices across religious barriers. It is most likely that they will have to deal with and take pastoral responsibilities for parishioners who enter into interfaith marriages. Increasingly they are likely to be asked to become members of multi-faith clergy group meetings and interfaith events in the places they will eventually go to minister.

Most of the students who come to the Seminary, however, have had theological and spiritual formations that paid little attention to the growing religious plurality of the United States and its implications for Christian ministry. More importantly, it is most likely that from Sunday School on they would have been taught that Christianity is the only true religion, that the other religions are in error, that others need to accept the Christian Gospel to be saved, and that it is their responsibility to witness this truth to those in other religious traditions. Even those students that have serious questions about this position do not quite know what to make of other religious traditions or whether it is at all possible to be a believing Christian and yet to be open and affirming about other ways of believing and being. In other words, in the area of interfaith relations there is much to learn as well as to unlearn, and the unlearning process can be quite threatening and painful.

If the student had come to the Seminary with such a theological formation and with the aim of equipping him or herself to the classical practice of Christian mission and ministry, it is very likely that the student would undergo a vocational and spiritual crisis during the unlearning process. The pedagogy adopted in the seminary context needs to have a pastoral dimension. It should both help the student move to a new understanding of other religious traditions and also help him or her to make sense of his or her own faith and vocation in a multi-faith context.

Teaching Faculty

Drew's reputation as a progressive seminary comes from the fact that the Deans and the faculty of the School are committed to taking on the cutting edge issues of our day in the curriculum and in the work in the classroom. Therefore, the Seminary as a whole is aware of the challenge of religious plurality and is deeply committed both to the promotion of interfaith relations and to prepare the students for a religiously plural world. Before I was hired as Professor of Ecumenical Theology to teach ecumenism and interfaith issues, I had been the Director of the Interfaith Dialogue program at the World Council of Churches in Geneva for over ten years. My responsibilities at the WCC had included promotion of interfaith relations, organizing bilateral and multilateral dialogues, and conducting seminars and workshops on dialogue in many parts of the world. I had by then also written widely on interfaith dialogue and on issues in interfaith relations. The new responsibilities at Drew gave me the opportunity to design a few courses that together would meet the different types of preparation needed for ministries in multi-faith communities. The preparation needed to go beyond a course on Interfaith Dialogue.

Pedagogical Assumptions that Underlie the Drew Program

Several assumptions, based on the discussions above, have gone into the way the program was built, which is clearly aimed at a specifically Christian classroom. The following five principles stand out:

1. In order to build mutual understanding, respect, appreciation, and dialogue among persons of different religious traditions, all concerned need to acquire an informed understanding of what the others believe in and practice, and how they hold their faith. This understanding is necessary to remove misunderstandings and prejudices that one had acquired over the years, often without being conscious of it.
2. As far as possible, we should seek persons of each religious tradition to speak for themselves and explain their own faith. Where this is difficult, the classroom should provide the opportunity for students to read original sources and material written on a specific tradition by persons of that tradition. It is also important that the students come to an understanding of

other religious traditions as *living* faiths that provide meaning to their adherents in our day. Direct exposure to places of worship, conversations with persons in their own worship environments, and attempts to build ongoing relationships with persons of other traditions would help build trust and confidence.

3. It is important that the students understand the different histories of Christians in relation to other religious traditions. Christian-Jewish or Christian-Muslim relations, for instance, has a long history of conflicts and misunderstandings that continue to influence the way these religious traditions look at and relate to each other in our day. It is important to grasp the issues and historical circumstances that contributed to mutual suspicion, misunderstandings and conflicts, and how they are being dealt with today in the interfaith context. Similarly, study of Hinduism and Buddhism should include issues related to Christian world missions and their impact on religious traditions that had come under colonial rules.
4. The study of other religious traditions and Christian relationships with them should help Christians to look critically at their own religious tradition. In other words, the study of other religious traditions and interfaith dialogue should help students to place their own tradition within the interfaith milieu. It should help them appreciate the different ways in which human communities have dealt with the mystery of life, the commonalities and differences they have in dealing with ultimate questions, and the contribution each religious tradition brings to the human spiritual quest.
5. The student should also be enabled to identify and deal with specific doctrines, teachings, theological understandings, and claims within their own faith that makes meaningful interfaith relations difficult. It has been said that we not only need to know the other, but we need the other to know ourselves. What challenges do the study of other religious traditions and interfaith dialogue bring to Christian faith and practice? In what ways do they challenge Christian self-understanding? In other words, the study of religions and interfaith relations should lead to mutual enrichment, mutual correction, and mutual self-criticism that enable all religious traditions to rethink their faith for a pluralistic world.

Courses designed to meet these requirements

It is evident that it is almost impossible to design courses that would meet all the ideals listed above. The student who comes to the Seminary seeks to be equipped in many other areas like theology, philosophy, ethics, biblical studies, church history, social issues, and skills in preaching, teaching, counseling, and pastoral ministry and so on. However, taking advantage of the fact that the student will spend three years in the Seminary, three complementary courses have been designed that seek to meet at least some of the expectations above:

- 1 Challenge of World Religions to Christian Faith and Practice
- 2 Theology of Religions
- 3 Cross-Cultural Immersion Course: India (Three weeks)

The course on World Religions and a Cross Cultural Immersion Course are required courses for all M.Div. students. Theology of Religions is an elective. While I lead the cross-cultural course to India, other professors lead cross-cultural courses to places like Turkey (for interaction with Islam), and Ghana (for interaction with African Traditional Religions) etc. But all students have to have this immersion experience in a culture and religion other than their own as a requirement for graduation.

In what follows I give the intention behind each of these courses and their content, with a more detailed examination of the course on the Challenge of World Religions.

The Course on the Challenge of World Religions to Christian Faith and Practice.

This is an outline course on World Religions that has been modified to meet goals beyond only acquiring knowledge about the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions. The title of the course has been formulated to indicate that in addition to studying other religious traditions, as Christians, we are also hoping to relate it to our own faith tradition to understand the ways in which they challenge, correct, enhance and enrich the way we understand and practice our own faith. It is not, however, not a course on comparative religion or comparative theology and it has no apologetic interest. An example would show the intent of the course:

Christians, for instance, have a variety of understandings on the authority of scripture to their faith and practice. Churches are divided over the nature of the authority given to scripture and how the scriptures are to be interpreted. Major divisions of the church relate to the comparative importance given to the authority of scripture and that of the traditions of the church. It is in this context that we study the native traditions of the Americas and African traditional religions that do not have written scriptures at all. Then we come to Hinduism with numerous scriptural texts, and a studied reluctance to institute a formal “canon” so that different groups texts become authoritative to different groups of Hindus; the fact that one group accepts the authority of a group of texts does not mean that another group is in error because they take a different group of texts to be authoritative to them.

With Buddhism we encounter the reality of multiple canons within the same tradition, depending on the language and the nation in which the original teachings were elaborated. In Judaism and Islam we again find different attitudes to the scriptural texts and their interpretation. While both the Torah and the Qur’an are believed to have been directly revealed by God to a human agent, views differ on the nature of the text and how much liberty one can take in its interpretation.

What the students are challenged to do is to examine the Christian approaches to the authority of scripture in light of these many ways of understanding authority without having to lose the centrality of the text to a tradition. Although no position is advocated by the instructor, students are able to revisit their own attitude to the Christian scriptures and put it in a new perspective. Similar “inner dialogue” is encouraged as we study the different understandings of the human predicament, salvation/release/ liberation/moksha/nirvana, and the ideals for fuller human life etc.

The course work itself is built on three pillars:

1. Class work
2. Visits to places of worship
3. Students’ semester-long projects on and with a selected religious community.

Class Work

After a general introduction to 'traditional religions', including the spiritual traditions of the first nations of the USA, the course concentrates on major religions that students would encounter in the course of their ministries: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism, Islam, Confucianism and Taoism. The last two religions are included because of a number of Korean students that study at Drew.

Two volumes are assigned as basic texts for the students to get information on the beliefs and practices of the religious traditions:

1. *Our Religions*, edited by Arvind Sharma, where the chapter on each religion is written by a scholar of that religious tradition. Also recommended as an alternate is *Introduction to World Religions* edited by Christopher Partridge, which has a number of illustrations lacking in *Our Religions*. (Reservations have been expressed on the presentation of Judaism in Partridge's volume.)

2. *New Religious America* by Diana Eck. This is added as a required reading alongside *Our Religions* because it gives the history of each of the religious traditions in the United States. This helps the students to deal with Hinduism, Buddhism etc, not as religious traditions in Asia, but as traditions that are alive in their own communities.

In addition, shorter texts are assigned for reading in relation to the major traditions, dealing in greater depth with a specific aspect of that religion. Students read *Darsan- Seeing the Divine Image in India* by Diana Eck to get deeper into image worship in India, Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, to have fuller understanding of the basics of Buddhism, and Rollin Armour Sr.'s *Islam, Christianity and the West - A Troubled History* to get some understanding of the tensions that have marked the history of Christianity with Islam. The BBC documentary *Chosen People* is used to get an understanding of the place of the Torah in Jewish life, to learn the spiritual significance of the Sabbath, and to have an impression of impact of the Holocaust on Jewish life and Jewish-Christian relations. All these books and the video could be replaced with more recent books if they cover the areas of concern with similar depth and breadth.

This aspect of the course has two goals. The first is to get an understanding of the basic beliefs and practices of the tradition and to be aware of the way in which they find expression in the United States.

The second goal, covered by the presentations made by the instructor, is to have an understanding of the history of the relationship of the given tradition to Christianity, highlighting some of the theological controversies, historical encounters, and issues and concerns that are central to the Christian relationship and dialogue with the tradition concerned.

The last two sessions of the course deal with two topics:

1. What challenges does the study of religions bring to Christian faith and practice?
2. What are the basic assumptions and principles of dialogue? What are the kinds of dialogue? How does one begin and sustain dialogue between religious communities?

These sessions, with greater emphasis on participation and discussion, reveal the transformation that takes place in students, both in their approach to other religious traditions and to the way they look at the doctrines and practices of their own Christian tradition. The course does not provide the opportunity to work these questions out in detail, but feedback from other professors who teach Theology, Bible, History, etc., shows that this experience is taken into the discussions in other classes.

Visits to Places of Worship

The second and a very important aspect of the course are visits to places of worship. Students are required, as part of the course, to be available on two Friday evenings, outside class time, to visit two places of worship:

1. Sri Venkateshwara Hindu Temple, Bridgewater, N.J.
2. The Sikh Gurdwara, Pluckemin, N.J.

After an introduction to the temple and what to expect during the visit, the class makes a bus journey to the Sri Venkateshwara temple in Bridgewater on a Friday evening, the time when the temple is very active with a large number of devotees. At the temple they receive a general introduction to the temple, receive explanations about most of the images and the rituals related to them, participate in the main puja, and hold informal conversations with worshippers.

A similar visit with advanced preparation is made to the Sikh Gurdwara on another Friday. Here they are received by the leaders of

the Gurdwara, given an introduction to Sikhism, and are taken to the main worship space. At the end of worship students sit down for the community meal, langar, which follows Sikh worship events. This gives them the opportunity to chat informally over the meal and to ask questions related to personal Sikh religious practices.

When we meet as class after each of these visits we do an evaluation of our experience. These experiences without exception turn out to be the highlights of the semester for most students. They are struck by the openness of these religious groups to have us involved in their worship. They are impressed with the deep devotion they witness, and are especially moved by the hospitality offered through the sharing of the Prasad ('sacraments') at the Hindu temple, and the invitation to the langar at the Gurdwara. To most students these would have been the first and only experiences of having been in a place of worship other than their own. I am yet to come across a student that had not been deeply impacted by the visit.

Semester Project

The semester project is the third dimension of the course on the Challenge of World Religions. The course does not require a semester paper but a project report. Two to three weeks into the course, all students are required to select a religious community other than their own for a semester project. As part of the project they are required to get in touch with the leaders of that community, interview the person in charge of its place of worship on the history and stages of development of the religious community in that place, find out the various ministries carried out by the place for its members and others, and seek to get an idea of the issues and problems they face as a religious community in the United States.

As part of the project, the student also participates in a few worship events in that community and interviews a few laymen and women to get their perspectives on their religious tradition and the issues they face in our day. The written report on the project is required to end with the student's own personal experience of relating briefly to the specific community.

The project is intended not so much to get information on the place of worship and the community that meets there, but to help the student take the first step to relate to a community other than his or her

own at the religious level, to shed unconscious fears and uncertainties about attending the worship of an unfamiliar community, to get some knowledge of the issues and problems faced by minority religious communities in the United States, and to build relationships with at least one or two persons of a different religious tradition.

Students are baffled when they first hear me explain the requirement. Most of them feel that this is a difficult if not an impossible assignment that they had not bargained for when they signed up for the course. Most believe that there are no such religious communities in their area and that it would be difficult to find a community that would be open to become part of their project. Many worry about it because they have no idea where to begin or how to go about it. I hold the line that it is requirement, and begin to give some thoughts on how this might be done, because much of the reluctance has more to do with the hesitation to cross boundaries and the unconscious fear of the 'other'. The hesitation begins to ease with the first class trip to the Hindu temple. In the safety of the group, most who doubted that anything can come out of a visit to a place of worship begin to see how exciting the experience would end up to be.

In fact, the Hindu temple is the best place to begin an introduction to those who have hesitations about being in a place of worship other than their own for the first time. To begin with, there is no structured, formal or congregational worship in a Hindu temple; this means that one can enter and leave the worship "event" at any time, and there is little that one needs to do to "fit into" the event. The temple authorities do not feel the need to recognize us as an "outside" group that needs to be formally welcomed. We are normally a group of Caucasians, African Americans, Koreans and a few Africans and other Asians that are immediately recognizable as "visitors" and not the regular Hindu worshippers. In fact, as soon as the priests see me they know that it is a Christian group from Drew. Yet, a warm hospitality is extended to us by treating us like all other worshippers, allowing us to walk around and see what we wish to engage people in conversation, and stand in line with the Hindu worshippers to receive the *prasad* at the end of the main Puja. While the students are taken aback by the many images in the temple, they are also impressed with the deep devotion of the worshippers.

An evaluation session in the next class meeting always brings out words like "informality", "freedom", "welcome", "hospitality", "holy atmosphere", "undeniable devotion" and the like. The organized and

guided Hindu Temple visit gives courage to the students to venture on the class project that throws them into the deep end of a dialogue experience. Every student that had done the project experiences a profound sense of having been in a dialogue, and gets over the fear of approaching the 'other' and the unknown.

The following extracts from the project reports are typical and witnesses to the value of the exercise:

HINDUISM:

"I chose Hinduism as the topic of my project. For this project I visited the Hindu Temple and Cultural Society of USA- Sri Venkateshwara Temple (Balaji Mandir), Bridgewater, NJ. I also interviewed a Hindu friend, Kumar, and had a phone interview with Dr. M.G. Prasad (Secretary of the Board of Trustees of the Temple).

... After the long chanting ... the worshippers lined up to receive the "communion", adults and children. While we were receiving the holy water and the "cup of blessing" I noticed how the worshippers were yearning for God's blessing and tried so hard to get their children close to the priests so that they might not be excluded from the "divine touch". How many Christian parents would try this hard for their young children to receive Holy Communion, I wondered. Their devotion and yearning for contact with the deity truly impressed me. Without either criticism or romanticism towards Hinduism, the heated yearning for divine connection that I witnessed in the temple made me look at my own religious community. When I was doing my internship at ... I was very disappointed at the lack of enthusiasm and yearning or love for their church ... it would not be fair for me to over generalize the Christian communities lacking enthusiasm and yearning for a divine contact. Nevertheless in the midst of all these thoughts in my mind, I could feel the common human yearning for the Eternal One and Hindus felt like my brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends, to whom we can relate as people of faith. ...

The other thing that struck me as I first stepped inside the temple was the sound of a ringing bell. Dr. Ariarajah explained to us that they are ringing the bell to get the god's attention since darsan (worship) is not merely about "seeing"

but also about "being seen" by gods. ... Hindu use of different senses intrigued me, not only as a pastor but also as a former educator. As a teacher, I learned to use different senses to help students learn more effectively and have practiced in the educational field. In the liturgical studies class, we learned to be creative to use different senses for a more effective worship experience. The colorful images I saw, the scent of the incenses I smelled remain in my mind quite vividly even now.

...

I remember a couple of years ago, when my close friend came back home from their visit to the Hindu temple (from an earlier World Religions class) with a little food they received after the puja. We shared that food together to show our openness and receptiveness to Hindu religion. It was the first time for me to eat something from another religious temple but I believed that it was okay. I know a lot of Christians would feel it sinful to partake in other religious communities' "communion" elements, thinking that they will be affected by the "evil spirit" with which "heathens" from other religions interact; however, I felt good about showing my acceptance to their hospitality by graciously receiving the water of blessing.

What I found interesting when receiving the water was that the priest who gave the water to me said, "Drink it", not knowing that we were already taught by Dr. Ariarajah. He just assumed that we would not know what to do with it, being visitors from outside the Hindu culture. However, I thought it was good of him to explain to me as he poured the water into my palms. Again, this part of the service was a good opportunity to see worshippers pulling their children closer and lifting them higher so that they can share the water and the blessing also. The scene reminded me of people in the street rushing to touch or be touched by Jesus. ...

I hope more Christians will have opportunities to learn about other religions without the agenda of evangelization. Learning experiences such as this one make us realize how ignorant and misunderstanding we are towards each other. Prejudices come from ignorance. To live with other religious groups peacefully as our neighbors, all our religious communities should learn about each other and learn to respect each other. Like my friend Kumar said, the Eternal

One is manifested in different ways for different people. And this attitude of religious pluralism is the only way to practice justice in inter-religious/inter-racial relationships. ...”

ISLAM:

Islamic Center, 55th Street (between Lexington and Third Avenue)

“I attended the late afternoon prayer meeting and then had the opportunity to sit and talk with the Imam. I was not sure if I would be permitted to join the prayer meeting because I am not a Muslim, but the Imam led me downstairs and brought a chair in for me to sit on. ... The prayer lasted for about 15 or 20 minutes, and at various points of time the Muslim devotees would kneel and lower their foreheads to the ground. The atmosphere of the room felt very spiritual. Have I understood the words I may have even joined in the prayer.Everyone was very friendly. At the conclusion of the prayer, several people came over to introduce themselves to me and talk for a few minutes. I had the chance to meet a young man, probably only 26 or 27, named Deno. He was born into a Catholic family in Macedonia and had converted to Islam several years ago. ... I was surprised how willing the Imam was to give me an extended block of his time- we spent a good hour or more conversing, and actually ordered Moroccan food for the two of us. The Imam was originally from Egypt.

I did not want to ask the Imam anything that would even suggest radical militancy, but even without my prompting he brought up the prejudice against Islam several times during the conversation. He said that most of the prejudice is from ignorance, and that we do not like the things that we do not know, and when we do not have the desire to know about something it becomes easy to develop animosity. The Imam has the desire to promote interfaith dialogue, which was encouraging. He decided to send his kids to the public schools because he did not want them to be sheltered from the rest of the world. ...

Overall, I had a very positive experience at the Islamic Center of Mid-Manhattan. I was encouraged by their acceptance of me, and the hospitality shown. I think the Imam is correct that there are a lot of misconceptions and prejudices around

Islam, worldwide and especially in America. I would like to continue my relationship with the Imam and some of the people I met while visiting.”

JUDAISM:

Temple Emeth of the Reformed tradition.

“... Despite the similarities (to aspects of Christian worship), there was something that I would call unmistakably ‘Jewish’ about the service. It is hard to put my finger on what it is; perhaps it was the style of music or the intonation of the text. Perhaps it was the Hebrew language interspersed with English I told the Rabbi that the service had more of a feeling of prayer than most church services, that are loaded with announcements and things that take our attention away from the task of worshipping God....

(Rabbi) Chuck set me straight about my misunderstanding of the acceptance of African Americans in Judaism. He noted two famous African American converts: Julius Lester, who was an Orthodox Jew, and Sammy Davis Jr. He also talked about the many Jewish people who stood with Martin Luther King (Jr.) during the civil rights movement. Rabbi Heschel was noted for saying that when he walked with King, “his feet were praying.”...

I was interested to know how Ruth (Rabbi Ruth Gias) felt about God and the Holocaust. She said, ‘I follow Abraham Joshua Heschel. He did not reject God in the face of the Shoah. Hasidic thinkers and others say that God was in the Shoah along with those who suffered. It means that God may not be omnipotent, but God is omnipresent.’ ...

Ruth is the Rabbi of *Chavurat Lamdeinu* Synagogue in Madison NJ. Since my church is in Livingston, we have already begun to talk about ways of working together. Passover and Easter are at different times this year, so we are talking about having her come and teach about Passover. I would also like her to come to my Sunday school class and talk about Hanukkah next year..... I would like to continue the conversation that was started by this assignment ... Having had my eyes opened to a better understanding of the Jewish faith and community, I can better see the possibility of

building bridges in the future for interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange, and social action.”

BUDDHISM

Kadampa Meditation Center and Temple, Glen Spey, NY.

“ ... Although I have been gradually coming to recognize my shortsightedness and narrowness in understanding Christianity and the other religious traditions, the experience of visiting the Hindu temple and Buddhist temple truly contributed in broadening my understanding of other religious traditions. Having grown up within Christian communities in a “Christian” country all my life, I believed that Christianity was the “right” religion and the only way to salvation even after reading about other religions and coming into contact with non-Christians at a social level. Fortunately, I came to study at Drew and my views have changed completely. So completely that I have been becoming more disillusioned with the way Christianity is generally understood and practiced in many, if not most, of the churches in the US and South Korea.

Feeling that my pluralistic belief that all religious traditions are valid in their own right no longer fit in with my conservative Korean-American Christian communities, I was searching for other understandings, experiences and vocabulary to assist me in understanding and expressing my ongoing journey with God. Thus it was wonderfully refreshing for me to study the various religious traditions in this class. It introduced me to new ideas and vocabulary that I can study further and use in my journey with my communities and the divine.

... I chose a Buddhist community and this temple for many reasons. First, visiting this temple allowed me take care of the basic assignment requirements in one trip. A single visit provided me participate in meditation and teaching, while providing me the opportunity to interview several ordained monks and nuns. Second, my wife, a daughter of a conservative, Korean-American UMC pastor, was the least resistant to visiting a Buddhist temple. Throughout my studies here at Drew and my drastically changing theology, I have tried to share with my wife as many of my new

experiences as possible so that she wouldn’t wake up one morning next to a stranger. She has been my constant conversation partner and read most of my papers that I have written for Drew so that she would at the very least have some understanding of my changing theology and of why they were changing. Third, I still interacted with my Korean-American communities and because Buddhism was the main religious tradition of South Korea before the coming of Christianity, it was most likely that I would meet Korean-Americans that were either practicing Buddhism themselves or have someone in their family practicing Buddhism. Finally, I felt that certain concepts in Buddhism strongly resonated with many of the theological ideas I was currently being introduced to and found the resonating echoes highly exciting and helpful in the ongoing process of constructing my theology. ...”

I have given an extended account of the project report for two reasons. First, for all the fears expressed in the beginning the class ended up doing projects related to a great variety of religious communities. The reports received, without any exception, point not only to a great deal of learning but also to transformation of attitudes. It is clear that the project requirement helps students to cross the physical and psychological barrier that needs to be crossed before they can engage in any meaningful interfaith dialogue when they leave the Seminary.

The Course syllabus is appended at the end of the essay.

The Course on Theology of Religions.

The Course on the Challenge of World Religions is designed, as seen above, to achieve two ends: namely, to have an informed understanding and to directly encounter people of other religious traditions. There is no doubt that these encounters would invariably raise questions in the minds of the students about their own religious tradition. As said earlier, most of them arrive at the Seminary with the view that Christianity has the truth and other religious traditions in one way or another are incomplete, deficient or wanting. Some among them would go even further to believe that the other religious traditions are in error, misleading people away from the truth.

These beliefs are formulated not on the basis of knowledge about the teachings of other religious traditions or the religious experiences of their adherents, but on the basis of the teachings of the church, both about itself and about “others”. In other words, the Christian theological understanding of the reality of other religious traditions or the Christian theology of religions is as major obstacle to interfaith relations and dialogue. If the students are not helped to re-think their theology of religions, interfaith dialogue would remain only at a superficial level of promoting good relations. This means that we need to help the students to situate the Christian faith in a religiously plural world and to be at home in it.

An attempt is made to achieve this by introducing the course on the Theology of Religions. This is not a required course, but those who take this course would have already done the courses in Systematic Theology and World Religions. The course has two components. The first part is an attempt to trace, study, and evaluate Christian approaches to other religious traditions in the past, and do a close examination of some of the recent scholars who seek theological foundations for Christian theological self-understanding that is relevant to a world of many religious traditions.

The second component looks at specific doctrines of the Christian faith and how they are being reconceived or are in need of re-conception. It attempts to struggle with issues raised by Christians who feel that the traditional ways in which the faith was understood promotes exclusivism and alienation and are unable to equip them for a religiously plural world. This involves re-visiting Christian doctrines of God, Christ, Salvation, Holy Spirit, Mission etc.

This course ends with a more detailed look at the implications, issues, problems and possibilities of interfaith dialogue, with study of some of the important documents on interfaith dialogue produced by the churches and the ecumenical movement. I am convinced that interfaith dialogue and theology of religions are deeply interrelated. Genuine dialogue demands a good theology of religions; a good theology of religions opens our hearts and minds to dialogue.

Cross-Cultural Course Immersion Trip to India

A semester long course on World Religions, even with a required project on another religious tradition, and a seminar on the Theology of

Religions can only help the students to rethink their attitude to other religions and to raise questions about the way they have defined their own faith in a pluralistic world. The cross-cultural trip to India helps students to immerse themselves in the Hindu religion and culture for three weeks. This helps them to understand how the religion expresses itself in the daily life and how it forms and shapes the culture and spirituality of its adherents. What follows is a description and evaluation of the Cross-Cultural Immersion Course in India (Hinduism) that was taken by 20 students in January 2008. I led the course along with another professor of the Seminary.

After 10 contact hours of preparatory presentations and discussion, supported by background readings at Drew, the trip was taken from 4th-24th January and covered six cities in South India: Chennai (Madras), Bangalore, Mysore, Tiruvallar, Coimbatore, and Madurai.

The goals of the course:

- To have a direct experience of living briefly in, and relating to, a religious and cultural context other than one's own;
- To become aware of the religious and cultural heritage of India and to gain an appreciation for a different way of life;
- To study the social, religious, economic and political realities, issues and problems faced by the country and its people and to see them in the context of global relationships;
- To get to know the life and ministries of the churches and the teaching and learning methods in theological seminaries in a religiously plural environment;
- To attempt to build a solidarity network with some institutions and groups in India in order to promote international and intercultural relationships.

The three week trip included exposure to the following:

- Visits to three seminaries in South India to get an understanding of theological education in the Indian social, religious and cultural context.
- Visits to two *Ashrams*. An *Ashram* is a community of people that share a common vision and commitment and come together to live a simple shared life according to commonly

agreed principles and disciplines. The first, Fireflies Ashram, where the students lived for three days, is committed to social justice and renewal through interfaith cooperation. The second, Shanti Ashram, led by Hindus, is run on Gandhian principles towards village upliftment. It also has an interfaith emphasis.

- Visits to several social service projects among the poor, orphaned and destitute children, women and other socially disadvantaged groups.
- Visits to the villages of the dalit (outcast) peoples and projects related to their economic and social improvement. Visits to these villages and projects (including lectures and a cultural program) expose the students to the social evils that are perpetuated by the Hindu caste system.
- Exposure to cultural events: The annual harvest festival (which included ceremonial cooking of the first grains of the new harvest, bull festival to honor and celebrate the bull, and a buffalo race), Indian classical dance, and Indian classical music recital.
- Lectures by experts on: The Indian economic situation, India and Globalization, Hindu-Christian relations in India, the situation of Indian women, Church in India, the plight of the Dalits (outcastes) etc.
- Visits to four Hindu temples and one Dalit temple, Sunday worships in churches.
- Visits to some places of interest.

Students that have not been outside the US before this trip came back from the experience radically shaken, challenged, and changed. The comment, “We will never see the world the way we saw it before,” captures the mood at the end of the trip. They would, of course, need several months to process their experience and to integrate it within their understanding of their ministries.

During the trip the students are required to keep a journal of their daily experiences. On their return they meet a few times to evaluate and reflect together on their experiences. They are also expected to write a 10-15 page paper on their experience in India,- what impact it has had on their self-understanding, their understanding of the world, and on the ministries they hope to do.

Comments on Pedagogy

When I was given the opportunity to design a few courses that deal with the Christian response to religious plurality, I was faced with some choices. One of the options was to design a course on interfaith dialogue, dealing with the history of the Christian relationship to peoples of other religious traditions, moving on to the principles, assumptions, methods and kinds of interfaith dialogue. A second part of this course would have dealt with the specific histories of Christian-Muslim and Christian-Jewish dialogues using some of the significant documents produced by the WCC, the Pontifical Council for Interfaith Dialogue, the churches, and some interfaith organizations on these relationships. Such a course would be valuable and needs to be introduced into the seminary curriculum.

When I looked at the student population at the seminary, however, I decided to go in a different direction. Most of the students did not have any idea of what their neighbors believed in. Many of them have never met another religious person at the religious level or have been to a place of worship other than their own. As mentioned earlier, they had theological formations that looked at Christianity as the only true religion and other religious traditions as erroneous and leading people away from their true destiny. This meant that there was a need to have a learning and unlearning process that prepared them for dialogue. At the same time, since the opportunity to add courses was limited, I had to build into these “preparation for dialogue” courses actual principles and methods of dialogue.

As for pedagogical methods, I had to incorporate the intellectual, experiential, practical, participatory, and transformation dimensions into the three courses. The course on the Challenge of World Religions has a significant emphasis on acquiring intellectual knowledge through readings, lectures and video clips. But it is fortified by the introduction into the same syllabus visits to the Hindu and Sikh temples that place enormous emphasis on participation and experiential learning. The project requirement to individually relate to a specific religious community, to participate in worship events, to hold conversations with persons at that place of worship, and to write a report and reflections on the experience, as seen from the quotes I have incorporated, have a transformational impact. They help to remove fear, prejudice, and

exclusivism and enable students to learn the art of taking the first steps to promote interfaith relationships and dialogue.

As far as the transformational dimension of the pedagogical processes, the course on the Theology of Religions and the Immersion Trip to India play a very significant role even though they are vastly different in format and character. The course on Theology of Religions takes heads on some of the basic theological formations that make interfaith dialogue difficult for most Christians. Even for those who hold a more open attitude to other religious traditions, the course gives the opportunity to rethink their faith in new and creative ways for a religiously plural world. It is here that they get the conviction that 'different' does not mean 'wrong', and 'all' does not mean 'any'; it is here that they learn that one can be both 'committed' and be 'open', and say 'yes' and 'no' to aspects in other religions as well as their own.

Perhaps the most significant transformational aspect of the learning process is the immersion trip to India. The course is designed to expose students to dimensions of Indian culture and religion, social injustices and abject poverty that takes away any undue fascination or romanticism about India and Hinduism. At the same time, they get ample opportunity to come to appreciate the depths of devotion, the richness of the cultures, and the studied acceptance of the plurality of ways of being and believing that makes India a text book case of a nation that this held together by a culture of dialogue and commitment to plurality. Both the official course evaluations and the semester papers by the students that go through these courses indicate that these courses effect a discernable spiritual transformation that widens their spiritual and theological horizons.

SYLLABI

The Challenge of World Religions to Christian Faith and Practice.

Christian faith has always been practiced in the context of other religious traditions. There is a long history of Christian relationship to almost all the religious traditions of the world. Over the past several decades, however, there is a new awareness of religious plurality. With increased population movements, people in almost all parts of the world are challenged to live as neighbors with people who follow religious traditions other than their own. Recent rise of militant expressions of religion has increased the interest in knowing more about religious traditions, their beliefs and practices and their role in contemporary society.

This is an outline course that seeks to give a broad understanding of the major religious traditions through an attempt to grasp their basic beliefs and practices, and through visits to the respective religious communities in their places of worship. An effort to understand the history and the issues in Christian relationship to these religious traditions is also built into the course. The required readings as well as the class work can only hope to open up an interest in these religious traditions. It is hoped that interested students would do wider reading beyond what is required by the course and would learn more by actual contact and dialogue with people of other religious traditions in their respective communities. There is no better way to learn about our neighbors.

The main text for the course is ***Our Religions*** by Arvind Sharma. The strength of this volume is that the chapters on different religious traditions are written by scholars who practice that particular faith. Readings from "***A New Religious America***" by Diana Eck gives the reality of each of these religious traditions in the American context. Where necessary there are also additional readings.

COURSE OUTLINE

Sept. 7th

General introduction to the Course, Readings, Course Requirements, and Visits to places of worship.

Introduction to the study of religions as living faith traditions.

Traditional Religions: **Religion of the Native Peoples.**

14th HINDUISM

Preparatory readings:

“Our Religions” p. 2 - 67.

“New Religious America” p. 80 - 141

Hinduism: Its origins, history, main branches, and basic beliefs.

Contemporary developments, Hinduism in America.

21st HINDUISM (CONT.)

Devotional Hinduism: Temples, Images, Rituals and Pilgrimages.

Issues in Hindu-Christian relations

Reading: “Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India”

28th Visit to the Hindu temple

OCT.

5th BUDDHISM

Preparatory readings:

“Our Religions” p. 71 - 137.

“New Religious America” p. 142 - 221.

Origins of Buddhism; Buddha the teacher, Basic teachings.

12th Reading Week (No class)

FIRST ASSIGNMENT DUE ON 19th. OCT:

TOPIC: “A Critical Assessment of the Hindu and Buddhist ideas of Reincarnation.”

19th BUDDHISM (cont.)

Plurality of Buddhism, Buddhist practices, Buddhism in America.

Buddhism through exposure to Buddhist monastic life (Video).

Reading: “What the Buddha Taught”

26th SIKHISM and JAINISM

The rise of Sikhism; Guru Nanak the teacher; Sikh beliefs.

Sikhism in America; The impact of Asian religions on America.

Preparatory readings: Search and read on Sikhism and Jainism in the Internet

Nov. 2nd. Visit to the Sikh Temple**9th CONFUCIANISM AND RELIGIONS OF NORTH ASIA**

Reading: “Our Religions” p. 141 -227.

Confucius, his teachings and its impact on East Asia.

Taoism and Shintoism.

16th JUDAISM

Preparatory readings:

“Our Religions” p. 239 - 355.

Basic Jewish beliefs, observances, and festivals; Branches of Judaism in America.

Video on Jewish prayer life and celebration of the Sabbath.

Issues in Jewish-Christian relations.

23rd Thanksgiving (No class)**30th ISLAM**

Preparatory readings:

“Our Religions” p. 427 - 532.

“New Religious America” p. 222 - 293.

“Islam, Christianity and the West - A Troubled History”

Rise of Islam; Mohammad the Prophet; Basic teachings of Islam.

Understanding Islam through its basic practices. (Video)

Issues in Christian-Muslim relations

DEC. 7th Christianity and Other Religions.

Outline of the history of Christian relationship to other religious traditions; the rise of interfaith dialogue; kinds of dialogue; principles of dialogue; dialogue related documents.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Attendance and participation in the discussions

Four to five pages reflection paper due on Oct. 19.

A Project Report

In addition to the field trips, each student is expected to get in touch with a religious community other than their own during the course of the semester in order to produce a project report of about 15 pages on

the specific community chosen for study during the semester. The project should be based on:

- Background reading on the history of the specific community and their place of worship in the New Jersey or New York area.
- A number of visits to the community to participate in their worship life as appropriate; Interviews with members of the religious community concerned.

The Project Report should contain the following:

- History of the specific place of worship and the community attached to it.
- Activities carried out by the student as part of the project.
- The programs and activities carried out by the community as part of their worship and community life.
- Issues and concerns faced by the community in practicing their tradition in the USA.
- General evaluation, and reflections on the impact of the project on the student.
- (A separate paper would be distributed in class on how to contact religious communities and the sensitivities that must be respected in carrying out the project.)

REQUIRED BOOKS: (other sources will be indicated in the class as we deal with each religious tradition)

- Arvind Sharma (Ed.), *Our Religions*, Harper San Francisco, 1993 (Paper back)
- Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*, Harper Collins, 2001, (0-06-062159-1) pbk.
- Rollin Armour, Sr. *Islam, Christianity, and the West- A Troubled History*, Orbis, 2002, (1-57075-407-1) paper.
- Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught, (Revised and Expanded Edition)*,

- Grove Press, 1974, (0-8021-3031-3)
- Diana L. Eck, *Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Anima Books, 1981.
- (0-89012-024-2)

Instructions on the Semester Project Report.

- Your final paper (project report) should emerge from an encounter that you have had with a religious community other than your own during the course of this semester. This normally means that you will have to visit a specific religious community a few times to get the material necessary for your paper.
- Your paper could relate to a Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, Native American or any other religious group that does not draw its primary inspiration from the Christian tradition. Please speak to me if you are in doubt whether the community you had chosen is acceptable for the final project report.
- The essay, not less than 10 and not longer than 15 pages, should normally contain three sections. First (about 5 pages) some background information of the religion itself and why you have chosen to study it. Second, a description of how you went about the project indicating the persons, places and events that you covered, and third, what you have found out about the particular community, its origins, its structure, its experience of being a religious community in the United States, the kind of programs they have for their followers and their outreach, and the issues they face etc., ending with your own evaluation of the situation.
- It is permissible to do a group project made up of no more than four persons, but please talk with me before you undertake a group project.

How to go about it?

You may already know of a religious community in your area. If so, please do your project on that community. If you do not know any religious community or where they may be located, go into the Internet

and search under the name of the religious community you are looking for. You would find a long list of possibilities, and choose one that is most convenient for you.

Go directly to the place of worship or telephone the person in charge directly and introduce yourself. Tell the person that you are studying their religious tradition in class and that you would like to know more about their community and their worship life. Fix the first appointment, and later on go as often as you need to. If the first experience is negative, choose a different place for your project.

Most of the religious communities will welcome you and would be happy to know that you are studying their religious tradition. With their permission you may also attend one or more of their worship events and also hold informal conversations or formal interviews with some of the worshippers.

Most places of worship in the USA would have literature about their place, their history, the kinds of program they have, and News Letters. They may also have websites that give this information. Collect these for they would provide you with valuable information for your project.

Make sure that you do not ask questions that might lead to the suspicion that you may be collecting information for the government or other intelligence agencies. For instance you do not ask in the Muslim place of worship questions like “What are your connections outside your country?” or “Are you funded by people outside for your mission?” or “What is your attitude to terrorism?” These may be valid questions, but in the present atmosphere they are likely to be misunderstood. Your questions must show that you have a genuine interest to know and learn about the religious tradition, its ministry, its experience of being a religious community in the USA and the issues they face as a religious community.

If you want to tape any conversation please ask their permission first.

Submission of the essay.

Do not wait to begin the project in April. It would be too late, because there would be many delays in getting appointments etc. Do not leave your name and ask them to call back. Most Asian religious leaders are happier to deal with you in person than on the telephone. Begin your project in about three weeks into the semester (it is independent of what we learn in class). Hand it in as soon as you have completed it. The last possible date for submission is April 28. If the paper is not in

by April 28 you will need to file an ‘Incomplete’ with the Registrar’s Office.

The previous classes have found the project they undertook very stimulating and rewarding. It took away the hesitation they have had in meeting people of other religious and cultural origins. All of them were warmly received by the community they had approached for their project. You too will find it an enriching experience.

THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS IN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Christianity was born in the Jewish environment and soon it came into touch with the religious traditions of the Greco-Roman world. Therefore, Christian attitude and approach to other religious traditions has occupied the church and its theology from the very beginning. The question became even more crucial when Christian missions expanded into Asia, Africa, Latin America and other parts of the world. Preaching of the Gospel had to be based on some theological assumptions about the faith of those to whom it was brought.

What has been the history of Christian approach to other religions? What advances have been made on this question within the ecumenical movement? What are some of the contemporary thinking on this issue? This course seeks to study this history and attempts to lift up some of the main issues that Christians need to face in relation to religious plurality. These include the doctrines of God, Christ, Holy Spirit, and the churches’ approaches to Mission and Evangelism. We would also look at the writings of the main personalities associated with this discussion.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The course will include lectures by the professor as well as class presentation by the students. The final grading will be based on the following:

Class attendance and quality of participation in the discussions: 20%

Student presentation to the class: 30%

A final paper of 15-18 pages on a topic related to the seminar: 50%

The student must select the topic of the paper and get the approval of the instructor in advance.

COURSE OUTLINE:

Sep. 6 General introduction to the course, its aims; expectations and assignments.

13 Theology of religions: A historical background with special emphasis on the history of the discussions in the ecumenical movement (Lecture)

20 An Evangelical Perspective on the Theology of Religions.
Read: Pinnock, *Wideness in God's Mercy*

27 Roman Catholic Approaches. Read: Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Theology of Religious Pluralism*

Oct 4 Roman Catholic Approaches (Continued). Documents of the Second Vatican Council. (Distributed in the previous class)

11 Reading Week (No classes)

18 A Liberal Protestant approach. Read: John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*

25 Postmodern approach. Read: Mark Heim, *Salvations*.

Nov. 1 Problems and issues in Theology of Religions. Read: Paul Knitter, *Introduction to Theologies of Religions*

8 Christian Theology for a Theology of Religions. (Please indicate in advance the doctrine on which you wish to lead the discussion.) Re-visiting the doctrines of God, Christ, and Salvation in the context of religious plurality.

15 Christian Theology for a Theology of Religions (Cont.)
Re-visiting the doctrines of the Holy Spirit, the Church and Christian Missions in the context of religious plurality

22 Thanksgiving Recess (No classes)

29 Interfaith Dialogue: A Historical Survey; theology of dialogue; principles of dialogue; kinds of dialogue and how to initiate and sustain dialogue. Significant documents.

Dec 7 Issues in Interfaith Relations. Read: *Not without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations*. Issues raised in each of the

chapters of the book will be introduced for discussion by a student.
(Please indicate the chapter you like to introduce)

REQUIRED BOOKS:

1. Clark Pinnock, *Wideness in God's Mercy*.
2. Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism*.
3. Raimon Panikkar, *Unknown Christ of Hinduism*
4. John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*.
5. Mark Heim, *Salvations*.
6. Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*.
7. S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not without My Neighbour - Issues in Interreligious Relations*.

CROSS-CULTURAL IMMERSION COURSE TO INDIA

Pre-Departure Course:

This 10 hours course is **required** for all who are traveling to India. I give below the dates and times of the course:

Monday Oct. 24, 4.00-6.00 p.m.- Introduction to the course.
Introduction to India.

Monday Oct. 31, 4.00-6.00 p.m.- The Religious Landscape of India.

Monday Nov. 7, 4.00-6.00 p.m.- Churches in India: History, Issues and Concerns.

Monday Nov. 14, 4.00-6.00 p.m.- Social, Economic and Political issues.

Monday Nov. 28, 4.00-6.00 p.m.- Introduction to the program in India.

Monday Dec. 5th From 4.00 p.m.- Logistics.

Reading requirements:

The REQUIRED reading: *The Idea of India* by Sunil Khilnani (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999) pbk.

In addition, I would be giving articles and handouts on different aspects of life in India when we meet for our classes.

RECOMMENDED Reading

The Argumentative Indian- Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity by the Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen (New York and London: Allen Lane, 2005).

India After Gandhi - The History of the World's Largest Democracy by Ramachandra Guha (New York: Harper and Collins, 2007)

These can be ordered from Amazon.com

NOVELS: If you wish to read a couple of good Indian novels in preparation for the trip you should buy:

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy, Harper Perennial, 1998.

Life of Pi by Yann Martel, Canongate Books Ltd.

Please get into the websites on India and familiarize yourself with any specific aspect of Indian life you wish to explore more.

The details of the places we would visit and the kinds of programs we would follow in India will be given at our first class meeting.