

6 Theological Education for Interfaith Engagement: The Philadelphia Story

J. Paul Rajashekar

The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

Editor's Introduction

“**Theological Education for Interfaith Engagement**” 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).

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Introduction

The issues and perspectives this essay considers are those of a "mainline" Protestant Seminary, the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (LTSP). The school was founded in 1864 to uphold the confessional theology of the Lutheran Reformation. Despite its commitment to a confessional theology, LTSP has evolved into an open-minded and theologically liberal institution. As a denominational Seminary affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it has maintained a progressive view of theology and ministry and a strong commitment to public engagement with critical issues affecting Christian ministry. It is not surprising, therefore, that interfaith engagement takes an urgency within such an ethos and is the specific focus of the essay; first, in regard to its location in the overall curriculum, and then in regard to a more detailed examination of a particular course.

The commentary on LTSP's mission statement written in the 1980s acknowledges explicitly the Seminary's commitment to be a "biblical, confessional, inter-confessional, inclusive and cross-cultural" community. The Seminary has sincerely sought the realization of those goals in its life and curriculum.

LTSP has worked to broaden its appeal both ecumenically and multi-culturally. For a Seminary of a predominantly white denomination, LTSP has been remarkably committed to theological education in urban, ecumenical and multicultural contexts in the

Northeastern United States. This commitment is reflected in the composition of its faculty and student body.

Over the years, the faculty has intentionally sought to ensure equal representation of male, female and persons of color (representing Asian, African-American and Latino backgrounds), although recent faculty changes may have skewed this balance. More than one-third of the faculty come from denominations other than Lutheran. Similarly, more than one-third of the students come from 30-plus denominations, including historically black churches. The Urban Theological Institute of LTSP, established more than 25 years ago, has been a pioneering initiative in training African-American clergy in the metropolitan Philadelphia area.

The Seminary offers MDiv concentrations in Black Church Studies, Urban/Metropolitan Ministry, Latino Ministry and Multicultural Ministry. Recently, the Seminary introduced an Asian Studies program in the form of an annual summer institute for doctoral candidates from various theological institutions in the Northeastern US. The Seminary's curricular commitments in global, interfaith, ecumenical and multicultural issues have promoted these developments during the past two decades.

It must be noted at the outset that the Seminary does not enroll students from religious faiths other than Christianity, except for Jewish students taking occasional courses in Hebrew Scriptures or attending interfaith seminars on campus. We are not an "interfaith Seminary." Nonetheless, our students have many opportunities to interact with people of other faiths in the neighborhood and our curriculum intentionally promotes interfaith understanding. A look at the geographical and institutional context of the Seminary provides a window into LTSP's interfaith engagements.

The Context

It must be noted that Philadelphia, as a historic city, has been a religiously tolerant and non-sectarian. Founded by Quaker William Penn in 1681, the State of Pennsylvania and the aptly named "City of Brotherly Love" has been the site of Penn's "Holy Experiment" in religious toleration. Pennsylvania was one of the few original colonies that would accept Catholics and Jews, Mennonites and Amish. Today, the tradition of religious diversity thrives in the city of Philadelphia

with diverse religious groups that include Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, and Pagans, among others.

LTSP is located on Germantown Avenue in the Mt. Airy section of the Northwest part of Philadelphia. Mt. Airy is a racially mixed neighborhood with a remarkable level of integration. Germantown Avenue dates back to colonial times and runs eight miles from the Northwestern suburbs toward the Center City of Philadelphia. On this stretch are 82 places of worship, two of which are mosques, one belonging to a black Muslim community and the other an immigrant mosque. The Avenue's Christian churches represent a variety of denominations. If one were to count the adjoining side streets, the number of places of worship would be even greater.

Within a block of LTSP is the Radha Krishna Temple belonging to the Hare Krishna movement. Within a three-mile radius are Jewish synagogues, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, a Vedanta center, a Korean Won Buddhist center, a Unitarian Universalist church, and dozens of high steeple churches, mega-churches and storefront congregations of various denominations. The Seminary has long been part of the Neighborhood Interfaith Movement that cares for homeless people by providing accommodations on campus when needed. The Seminary has self-consciously sought to integrate itself into the community and has financially invested in the betterment of the Mt. Airy community. The surroundings of LTSP therefore provide a rich context and a veritable laboratory for varieties of religious expressions, for Seminary education and for pastoral formation.

The immediate context of the Seminary significantly reflects the larger geographical context of the Northeastern United States, a region that supplies the bulk of LTSP's students. The majority of our graduates return to this regional context to pursue Christian ministry. Awareness of religious diversity and plurality in our society is self-evident to the majority of our students hailing from this region. Students coming from parts of the Midwest, rural Pennsylvania and Southeastern States may find the urban/metropolitan, multicultural/ecumenical and religiously diverse context somewhat overwhelming or threatening initially, though they frequently choose to come to Philadelphia precisely to gain an exposure to these realities. The Seminary offers this experience and exposure without charging extra tuition for it!

The need to lift up interfaith concerns in the curriculum at LTSP was in part based on the geographical context of the Seminary and in part influenced by the make-up and experiences of the student body. A decade or so ago, more than 50 percent of our student body was second career (a situation that has significantly changed in recent years with increasing enrollment of students straight out of college). The second career student normally came with significant experiences, especially having worked or interacted with people of other faiths. They represented a generation that had previously dabbled in religious experimentation (practicing Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Buddhist meditation, etc.) or taken courses in world religions. The theological issues arising out of the context of religious plurality were often at the forefront of their thinking, though those concerns were seldom explicitly addressed in the courses they took. Their questions were sometimes suppressed because of doctrinal or missional emphases of certain courses that were more geared toward preserving denominational integrity and purity or missional expansion than toward the promotion of interfaith dialogue. Though occasional courses on World Religions were offered by visiting faculty (usually missionaries on furlough), theological and pastoral issues relating to interfaith reality received little attention. The pastoral context of our graduates in the Northeast, especially the emerging interfaith realities of the Northeastern US, received less attention in the curriculum.

Addressing interfaith engagement in teaching and learning does require some measure of experience and expertise in the faculty. Though there was no resistance to introducing interfaith themes and issues in the curriculum, no one member of the faculty would readily take on the challenge, save the two Old Testament professors who were deeply interested in contemporary Judaism and the professor steeped in American religious history. For the record, the Seminary had actively participated in the “Seminarians Interacting” program (now defunct) that brought together Christian, Jewish and Muslim theological students for mutual engagement and exchange. Faculty and students visited each other’s institutions and places of worship and immersed themselves in dialogue with one another in classes. This experience was valuable to students, but only a few could participate in it. In addition to this program, the Seminary occasionally offered a course on Contemporary Judaism by a faculty member of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Some Jewish students also took LTSP courses, providing some interfaith interaction in classes.

The faculty realized the importance of an interfaith focus and sought to strengthen faculty resources in this area. In the process of a faculty search for a systematic theologian, it became apparent that someone with expertise in world religions and inter-religious dialogue in relation to Lutheran theological tradition would be a valuable addition to the faculty. As is well known, Lutheran tradition defines itself primarily in theological terms and therefore an understanding of a Lutheran theology of religions was integral to interfaith engagement. With this point in mind, LTSP invited the author of this essay to join the faculty in 1991 as Associate Professor of Systematic Theology. I was hired because I was trained in Systematic Theology, wrote my doctoral dissertation on Luther, hailed from a non-European racial and cultural background, had studied Islam and Hinduism and had served the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, Switzerland, as the first Executive Secretary for Church and People of Other Faiths. In that capacity I had worked with churches around the world in promoting interfaith dialogue and initiating studies in theology of religions. My background in the ecumenical movement, interfaith dialogue and World Christianity was thought to be an asset by the faculty.

My joining the faculty also brought to the Seminary interfaith experiences from the Indian context, from where I originally came, and understandings of World Christianity. So beginning in early 1990s, the Seminary began to offer a number of courses on World Religions, Interfaith Dialogue, and Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. Prof. Mohamaud Ayoub of Temple University and I taught the latter course. The Seminary was also used as a neutral site for occasional courses on Jewish-Muslim Dialogue sponsored by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Temple University. A few LTSP students were allowed to take that course. In courses on Introduction to Systematic Theology and Christology, I intentionally introduced the theological and conceptual issues of interfaith encounter as part of the theological subject matter (more about this later). At the graduate level additional courses on Theologies of Religions were also offered.

The faculty’s awareness and sensitivity to the Seminary’s context, the needs of pastoral ministry, and the concerns of adequately equipping our graduates with skills and understandings for negotiating in a pluralistic society were important factors that contributed to the development of an emphasis on interfaith issues at LTSP. In the past five years, two additional faculty members have been added with expertise in interfaith matters, one of them trained in Islamic Studies.

Also, the professor who teaches courses in American religious history devotes a considerable amount of time to modern religious movements in some of his courses.

Rethinking Curricular Requirements

Christian theological institutions are constantly reviewing and rethinking the nature of theological education. The most recent revision of the curriculum at LTSP began in 2002, and a new/revised curriculum was introduced in 2004. The main guiding theme of the new curriculum is “Public Witness.” Among the many new features of this curriculum, two important elements are directly linked to interfaith concerns.

First, a course in interfaith understanding became a *requirement* for the MDiv. In the prior curriculum, students were required to fulfill at least one of three topics: Global, Ecumenical, or Interfaith. In the new curriculum, all three topics became requirements. The curriculum defined this requirement in experiential terms, i.e., some amount of exposure beyond the classroom. For instance, both Global and Interfaith requirements could be fulfilled by travel seminars to India, parts of Asia, Africa or the Middle East. In the case of academic courses, a substantial amount of student work and reflection must be grounded in the practice of interfaith dialogue. I will articulate this further in a later section.

Second, the new curriculum reflected the realization that in most Seminary curricula, if they include any interfaith requirement, it is usually offered during the last year of Seminary education. LTSP faculty realized that by then, much of the theological formation had already occurred in students. The new curriculum wanted to raise interfaith issues at the start of theological education rather than at the end. Accordingly, the new curriculum created a two-week-long “Prolog” session, which is a for-credit course required for all incoming students. The Prolog sessions were designed to deal with introduction to theological studies, introduction to issues in ministry (congregational or otherwise) and introduction to issues in local community and society. During these sessions, the incoming students are introduced to religious leaders of the community (Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist) with presentations and dialogue between them. Students are then taken to places of worship (usually the closest Mosque or the Radha Krishna Temple) to witness worship and engage in informal

conversations. The visits are followed by a lecture on theological issues in interfaith encounter from a Christian perspective. The students are asked to write brief reflections on their exposure to other faiths for small group discussion.

By front-loading the issues of interfaith concerns, the curriculum exposes students to profound theological and pastoral issues before they take their regular courses. These issues raise new questions, insights and perspectives in the courses they will be taking in all theological disciplines. In the process, those faculty members who are narrowly focused on their disciplines or reluctant to address how interfaith issues impinge on their understanding and teaching of the Christian faith (there are those in every faculty!) are in a way forced to respond to questions posed by students exposed to interfaith realities. In a small way, this reality has facilitated interdisciplinary conversations among faculty on interfaith issues.

Theological Assumptions

The two new features of the new curriculum are based on certain assumptions. The overarching guiding principle of the new curriculum, as previously noted, was “Public Witness.” The notion of “Public Theology” or “Public Witness” is understood and interpreted by members of the faculty differently and in relation to their respective disciplines. However, in faculty deliberations there was consensus that public witness entailed a view that our graduates are not only pastors, religious functionaries or caretakers of congregations, but are also leaders of the local community, embracing the whole community. Such a commitment invariably leads to involvement with other Christian churches and other religious communities. It requires initiative on the part of pastors/leaders to meet with leaders/clergy of other religious communities in building and strengthening local communities. Seminary education should therefore provide necessary skills and understanding of other faiths and traditions to engage in dialogue with those communities. Public witness involves critical and dialogical engagement with people that invariably involves mutual listening and sharing. Listening and understanding the perspectives of people of other faiths or no faith is an essential prerequisite of Christian witness. Students are to know at least one other religious faith besides their own or a rudimentary understanding of the major faiths as essential preparation for engaging in Christian ministry.

Thus, Public Witness or Public Theology served as the linchpin of LTSP's curricula in all its degree programs (including PhD). The "public" dimension is here understood broadly in terms of public accountability of the faith in dialogical engagement with people and societal issues. The implicit assumption is that all Christian claims, and for that matter all religious claims, in our society are subject to public critique and accountability in the sense that the legitimacy of all such claims has to be articulated in relation to the claims and commitments of other communities that share the public space.

In a religiously pluralistic society, unilateral claims on the part of one religious community are subject to intense interrogation, implicitly or explicitly. Awareness of religious plurality in our midst invariably raises the question, "By what authority do faiths make such and such claims?" All historical claims to the authority (whether grounded in scripture, community, tradition, or history) are therefore subject to critique and challenge. Whether one likes it or not, religious plurality invariably relativizes all exclusive claims, in the sense that a particular claim becomes one among many, and therefore demands intelligible and coherent articulations of faith that makes sense to others. Put differently, the public theology and public witness that Christians profess is fundamentally one of responding to the question, "Why are you a Christian?"

A theologically informed understanding of pastoral ministry must therefore respond to such interrogations as honestly and intelligibly as possible. Public witness of the church is thus a witness chastened and tempered by the reality of counterclaims put forward by other religious communities. Christian theology and ministry can neither wish away nor ignore such counterclaims and live as if we are still in the era of European Christendom, where almost everybody was a Christian, nominally at least! Public theology, then, is a discourse and a reasoned articulation of the Christian faith that is informed and challenged by the diverse realities of our world, and public witness is the practice of being a Christian in relation to, rather than over against, people of other faiths, ideologies and worldviews. The ability to articulate and practice the Christian faith, coherently and intelligibly, in the context of one's ministry is the intent of the new curriculum. To this end, in the senior year the curriculum offers a number of "public theology seminars" as capstone courses on a range of contemporary issues.

The above assumptions emerged in the course of protracted faculty deliberations over a two-year period before the faculty and the

Board of Trustees adopted the new curriculum. While all the faculty members recognized our context of religious pluralism, there were concerns as to how our interfaith requirement would be interpreted in the context of our supporting church constituencies. As a denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, like other Protestant denominations, is experiencing a decline in membership. Predictably, there is some urgency to arrest the decline with a renewed focus on evangelism, outreach and strategies for church growth. Bishops from our supporting synods have often accused seminaries of not producing enough missionaries or "mission developers" or "evangelists." Our supporting constituencies have not always caught up with fundamental changes in the religious landscape of our society. Thus they tend to live under assumptions of a bye-gone era of Christian monopoly and conquest of the world. Emphasis on "mission" or "evangelism" appeals to certain constituencies in the church while "interfaith dialogue and engagement" appeal to other constituencies. Theological curricula thus reflect some ambiguity in this regard. Though LTSP has always offered courses on evangelism and congregational outreach, the missional or evangelizing dimension of the church's ministry had to be made visible in the curriculum as well. The LTSP faculty's compromise was to add a required course on "Stewardship and Evangelism."

How the interfaith requirement and the evangelism requirement cohere in the context of the new curriculum was not really thought through. It appeared that the focus of the evangelism course was to be more on reaching out to the lapsed Christians of the post-modern generation and reviving oxygen-starved congregations than evangelizing people of other faiths. There was consensus that courses on evangelism and mission be included in the course offerings and listed in the catalog. But a serious discussion on the importance of evangelism vis-à-vis interfaith dialogue in the curriculum did not occur because of the impact of 9/11 on the community. In effect, the 9/11 tragedy provided a far greater impetus and urgency to introduce the interfaith focus into the curriculum. Our supporting constituency began to press the Seminary as to how we deal with Islam and the challenge of religious fundamentalism in our curriculum! There were calls that the Seminary should offer courses on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations.

The commitment to promote interfaith understanding was facilitated, not least, by the theology of the Lutheran tradition. The

Lutheran theological tradition has always affirmed a positive view of God's creation, despite the fallen character of creation. The Lutheran dialectic of law and gospel, creation and redemption, God hidden and revealed, believers as saint and sinners, etc., allowed for some degree of positive acknowledgement of values, ethics and contributions of those outside the Christian faith. Though not all Lutheran theologians have pursued the logic of this dialectic in their understanding of the Christian faith, the Lutheran perspective does open up positive encounters with people of other faiths. The faculty recognized the potential of the Lutheran tradition to be hospitable to the faith and claims of other religious traditions and to engage in dialogue with them as an essential aspect of contemporary Christian witness. In other words, the Lutheran heritage, theologically speaking, excluded any fundamentalist or exclusivist notions of the Christian faith. The introduction of the interfaith emphasis in the new curriculum received the full and enthusiastic support of the faculty.

Beyond the curriculum, the Seminary has periodically hosted public events that promote interfaith understanding. For example, in spring of 2008 and 2009, the Seminary sponsored an interfaith dialogue series on "Tough Texts," that examine scriptural texts that are deemed problematic today. The series was cosponsored by several organizations in Philadelphia committed to promoting interfaith understanding. The Seminary's ongoing engagement with other religious communities is an important expression of the sort of public theological engagement that the curriculum seeks to advocate.

Personal Convictions

As a member of the faculty teaching in the area of Systematic Theology, it was my conviction that injecting interfaith concern into the theological curriculum is not a matter of introducing a course or two. In other words, it is not an addendum to the theological curriculum -- one more requirement that students must fulfill prior to their graduation. Interfaith issues must somehow permeate the totality of theological reflection if there is to be any value in the context of religious plurality. No doubt theology has been done and can be done in segregated communities, -denominationally, culturally, racially or ethnically, -but claims of universal validity and relevance of such theologies are indeed dubious.

My family origins in India and my ministry led me to conclusions that I had never imagined. Even before I took on theological studies, my first call to ministry was to work as an evangelist among Muslims in rural South India. Later on in life, I served as a pastor and radio preacher in my mother tongue (Kannada). Both these experiences in a way transformed my self-understanding as a Christian from a gung-ho Christian evangelist to a practitioner of interfaith dialogue. As a radio preacher (together with my wife, who is also an ordained minister), I received thousands of letters every week from my audience, the majority of them Hindu, who professed their faith and admiration for Jesus as a Guru, Savior and Healer. But they were unwilling to associate themselves with the established church and questioned the claim of exclusivism that the church proclaimed and the implicit denigration of the Hindu faith it implied. These letters led me then to reflect on the issue of "un-baptized believers" in India. In Asian, cultural allegiance to multiple faiths is far more common than in the West.

My experiences in radio ministry eventually led me to rethink Christian theological claims of the modern missionary era, especially among Protestant communions. Theological articulations that rely solely on the canons of one's own community, sacred texts, traditions, culture, heritage and hermeneutic, though valid, it appears, are limited in their relevance and value beyond that community. Such "self-referential theologies" have become highly problematic in a "globalized world" where religious ideas, beliefs, concepts, practices and values have no boundaries. With the religious and theological "flows" going every which way and influencing our worldviews, claims of religious exclusivism seem untenable and difficult to justify. This is not to deny the exclusive content and contours of religious faiths in their historical specificity; but, the fact is that the exclusive claims originated in a culturally or religiously circumscribed context makes them highly problematic. Acknowledging the reality of religious plurality in our midst, therefore, demands recognition of the limitations of all "self-referential" theological articulations and the accompanying universal claims. Put differently, interfaith realities of our society question the prevailing "self-sufficiency" of religious traditions and warrant mutual engagement.

Christian theology, as my own journey led me to believe, must move from a "self-referential" to a "cross-referential" posture in its conviction, method, hermeneutic and articulation. In other words, we

need to articulate Christian theological convictions not in isolation from other religious claims and convictions or against them, but in relation to them. Every theological locus or doctrine in Christian theology must in some way be informed by and engage with concepts, claims and convictions of other religious traditions. This task is not easy given the diversity and profundity of other faiths. The point here is not that anyone will ever succeed in relating to people of other faiths in all their diversity, but rather that Christian engagement with people of other faiths is to be grounded in a dialogical praxis as a prerequisite for theological reflection. In teaching courses in systematic theology, I have endeavored to expose students to diverse religious ideas, beliefs, concepts, models and understandings of theological themes.

To do theology “cross-referentially” is to explore the interface between Christian faith and other faiths as the locus of theological discourse. This is seldom done in Western theological texts and discourses. This suggestion may seem somewhat beyond the scope of theologians and theological institutions committed to an aggressive missional understanding of the church at the expense of other religious claims and communities. Christian theology articulated from the perspective of interfaith dialogue is not concerned with claims of superiority but rather seeks a respectful understanding of other beliefs and values and how it might enrich one’s own faith. It is an attempt to grasp the hermeneutics of faith as they are embodied in the lives of people in all their interactions.

The perspective suggested above is different from that of a Christian theology of religions. Christian theologies of religions are attempts at articulating the place and role of other faiths in relation to one’s faith. They are theoretical constructs that seek to accommodate the claims of other religious traditions to facilitate mutual engagement. Such attempts may or may not require dialogical engagement in so far as they are attempts to rethink one’s theological assumptions to legitimize the truth claims put forward by others without undermining one’s own claims and convictions. These approaches are valuable in interfaith contexts in preparing for dialogue. But to do theology cross-referentially is to commit to a dialogical engagement with people, texts and traditions as prerequisite for Christian theological reflection. Dialogue thus becomes both a method and a source of doing theology. (The approach I take in teaching Systematic Theology cross-referentially is somewhat similar to a Comparative Theology approach advocated by some scholars. Comparative theology tends to focus more

on textual resources to deepen Christian appreciation of other faiths and involves a rigorous process of study and reflection. In the context of seminary education, there are serious constraints on time that limit explorations into the deeper dimensions of interfaith encounter. Nevertheless, even in teaching Christian theology, I endeavored to draw the attention of students to insights from other faiths as a way to deepen Christian self-understanding.)

The preceding personal reflections, I hope, provide some of my operating assumptions in teaching courses at the Seminary. Besides the systematic theology courses, I have taught other courses that are focused on interfaith dialogues. For the purposes of this case study, I have focused on one particular course, “Theory and Practice of Interfaith Dialogue.” I have taught this course sometimes as a half credit course and at other times as a full credit course.

Theory and Practice of Interfaith Dialogue

The central focus of the course is to introduce seminarians to the questions and challenges of religious pluralism and how those questions impact Christian ministry. The objectives of the course are: 1) Understand and explore the reality of religious pluralism in North American society and identify the issues it raises for the Christian faith; 2) Learn the theory and practice of interreligious dialogue; 3) Examine theological models of encounter in Christian history and theology and 4) Explore practical and pastoral responses to interreligious issues in congregational ministry.

The course attempts to prepare seminarians to engage in actual practice of dialogue with neighbors of other faiths in the context of their future ministry with some understanding of pertinent theological issues arising out of that encounter. The course fulfills a curricular requirement and hence almost all MDiv and MAR students take it during their first year of study at the Seminary. As noted above, in the Prolog sessions at the very outset of theological study students are introduced to representatives of other religious communities and visit a mosque, Hindu temple or a Buddhist Center. I must note here that the initial exposure to places of worship is often a positive experience for most students, though some students have found the exposure a bit unsettling. This is true for those who have never visited a Hindu temple where idols of the deity are prominent. Witnessing a Hindu *puja* (worship) raises some profound questions to those nurtured under

the biblical injunctions against idolatry. In follow-up discussions, the meaning of idols and idol worship in the Hindu or Buddhist traditions is a regular topic of interest. In a different way, the visit to the mosque usually elicits considerable discussion on the role and place of women in the Islamic tradition. On the other hand, students find the meditation practices of Won Buddhism from Korea rather comforting and relaxing.

I mention these experiences to indicate that students, especially Euro-American/white and African-American students, often encounter difficulties in understanding and processing religious practices and beliefs so different from their own. It is one thing to study Hinduism by doing a course in college and it is another thing to witness the emotional worship of the Krishnas in their temple. Students often experience a conceptual disconnect with the religious beliefs and practices of others. The very thought of attending the worship services of Hare Krishnas or Muslims is disconcerting to some students of evangelical or fundamentalist leanings. Taking one's shoes off at the Hindu temple or covering one's head at the mosque can be an unsettling experience to some. Their initial experiences in the Prolog sessions have often served to break-down resistance or prejudice toward other faiths prior to taking this course.

In a semester-long course, each session of the class is divided into three parts. The first hour is my lecture followed by a plenary discussion. The second hour is small group discussion focused on reading assignments. The third hour is a plenary discussion on both the lecture, reading materials and issues raised in small group discussion. The course syllabus indicates the texts and topics for each class session. I often hand out the outlines of my lectures that share my own experiences in interfaith dialogue and note some of the key concepts from other religious traditions. I have increasingly utilized internet based resources in lectures. For instance, in introducing religious diversity in the United States, I take students to the web site of the Pluralism Project of Harvard University. Similarly, religious texts, photographs of famous places of worship, outlines of the beliefs and practices of diverse religious traditions are now readily available. The web-based research serves students with no prior knowledge of other faiths as a useful tool in preparing them for actual interreligious conversations. Given the diversity of our student body, the small group discussions have always been lively, with students taking divergent

theological positions and challenging one another to rethink their views.

The course syllabus outlines my lectures covering a range of topics. In my initial introduction to the course I find it important to share my own personal journey in coming to grips with interfaith issues, especially my childhood experiences and my earlier career as an evangelist and radio preacher in India, prior to becoming an advocate for interfaith dialogue. Students tend to resonate with my sharing of personal experiences and struggles, which helps them to understand and respect the theological conclusions I draw from these experiences despite their own personal fears and reservations of interfaith encounter. After my introduction to the context of religious pluralism in North America, I turn my attention to Christian ecumenical responses to interfaith realities. Though I focus mostly on the World Council of Churches, the Vatican II documents and documents from other World Communions, I also draw attention to documents of the Lausanne Movement and other conservative, evangelical or Pentecostal perspectives.

I spend a fair amount of time helping students understand some basic ground rules of interfaith dialogue:

- Dialogue is between people and not between religions
- Dialogue is not a disguised monologue
- Dialogue not as a debate nor winning an argument, but a search for understanding
- Respecting the self-definitions of others
- Textual definitions of beliefs vs. how people embody beliefs
- Recognizing one's prejudice or stereotypical views of others
- Dangers of comparing the best of one's faith with the worst of others
- Use of scripture in a multi-scriptural society
- The goals and limits of dialogue
- The place of witness in dialogue
- The meaning and ethics of proselytism.

Several of my lectures focus attention on historical encounters between Christianity and other faiths by selected examples from the early church (Justin Martyr, Origen), Medieval period (John of Damascus, Spanish encounters with the Muslim Moors), Reformation period (Luther), Modern missionary encounters (mostly drawn from India, including those from the period of the Hindu Renaissance in Bengal and Latin America), and contemporary encounters (the rise of religious fundamentalism, “Clash of Civilization” theories, Islam and the West). Depending on the interests of students, I have offered special topic lectures on “Religion and Religions in the Bible,” “Scripture and Scriptures in Pluralistic Societies,” “Scriptures and Interreligious Hermeneutics,” “Prayer in a Pluralistic Society,” “Witness and Dialogue,” and “Lutheran Theological Perspectives on Religions.” I draw considerably from personal experiences in these lectures, and from a variety of cultural contexts in a way that students have found them helpful.

The most important component of this course is the dialogical requirement. In addition to participation in class discussions and fulfillment of assigned readings, the students are to engage in actual dialogue with a person(s) of another faith. The students are to spend at least 4-6 hours in conversation and write a reflection paper on how they were challenged by the beliefs and practices of a person(s) of another faith. This assignment often turns out to be the most challenging part of the course to students. For some, it is a challenge to find a person of another faith in the surrounding community. They often seek my help. I provide them some leads or direct them to the Yellow Pages (look under the category of “Churches”!). Even more of a challenge to some is their difficulty to initiate a conversation that opens up the religious worldview of their conversation partner. The most difficult part of this dialogical experience for some students is the ability to listen to theological views that are so different or alien to their understanding and that in some way radically challenge or contradict their religious beliefs. Understanding the conceptual differences and nuances between faiths requires attentiveness and willingness to probe without intimidating the other. Occasionally, students also have negative experiences of dialogue. They feel they were not taken seriously or were preached at by others. In some cases, their dialogue partners weren’t proficient in their own faith in responding to questions.

My assumption behind this assignment is to let students learn interfaith dialogue by actual practice and personal experiences rather

than by my staging a dialogue in a class setting by inviting a person of another faith. Researching and identifying an appropriate partner for dialogue and thinking through how one must approach the other is part of the learning experience. Personal experience of interreligious encounter is more valuable than reading texts of comparative religion. It is my conviction that *dialogical praxis* is essential for a proper theological and pastoral relationship with people of other faiths. How to meet and greet people of other faiths is also an important part of theological and professional formation of clergy.

The students are required to write a reflection paper based on their dialogues. The expectation is that the paper is not a verbatim report of the conversation but rather a reflection on how the conversation challenged their prior assumptions about their faith or their perception of the faith and practices of the other. In my oral instructions, I make it clear that I am not looking for doctrinally orthodox reflections or theologically correct responses in their written submission. They are free to arrive at whatever theological conclusions are appropriate in light of their encounter, and the assignment is not some kind of doctrinal test! What I am interested in is knowing more about their theological struggles in relation to the faith of the other and how it reinforces or transforms their theological self-understanding. I encourage them to construct their own theological framework appropriate for their ministry. For Lutheran students, I encourage them to look at Lutheran theological resources in formulating their theological framework and for others, their own denominational heritage and resources. Students find this guidance helpful, even liberating, for it often eases their anxiety about the burden of defending their faith in dialogue or writing a doctrinally acceptable reflection paper.

In reading numerous reflection papers, I have noticed that many students observe how vulnerable they felt in their conversations or how inadequate they felt in their knowledge of the faith of their interlocutors. For a majority of students, this dialogical experience is a formative experience in the sense that though they were aware of religious plurality in society, they had seldom ventured to encounter it in a personal way. The assignment helps the student to “experience” religious diversity in a personal way rather than as an academic subject. Again, for a majority of students, *the experience of such encounter was more valued than the content of the dialogue*. Not a few students have indicated to me that the exercise was personally liberating and that they

felt confident to engage with others without fear or theological inhibitions. Students have often recalled their experience at the college level with students of another faith(s) or from another country in influencing their view of the other. For those who had some exposure to beliefs and spiritual practices of another faith in their prior life, the dialogical experience was a deepening of their spiritual journey.

Lest I give the impression that the course is a life-transforming experience for all my students, I must note that I usually find a few “Teflon Students” for whom the assignment is a waste of time! They would prefer to evangelize rather than listen to the other. For these students the very thought of engaging in dialogue with black Muslims or idol worshipping Hindus is highly problematic. African-American students are reticent to deal with the topic of Black Islam or the Nation of Islam. And yet, the assignment forced some African-American students to reconnect with family members who had become Muslims.

In the full-credit version of the course, I require students to write another paper reflecting on pastoral issues in interfaith contexts. The issues are based on real situations that students have encountered, such as the issue of interfaith marriages, funerals, prayer and worship; Holy Communion for the unbaptized person of another faith; Yoga classes or Buddhist meditation in churches; belief in reincarnation and Christian response; membership in different religious traditions; interfaith counseling; issues of evangelism and mission; and witness in relation to dialogue, etc. This assignment involves interviewing pastors, rabbis or imams to identify issues and pastoral practices in handling them. The sharing of these stories and case studies is a valuable learning experience for students.

Learning Outcomes

Having taught this course a number of times at LTSP, it is my experience that courses of this kind and their impact upon students are hard to measure or quantify. Interfaith awareness is not simply a matter of exposure to the sociological reality of religious pluralism in our midst. It is not about learning the essential beliefs of one or more religious faiths. It is fundamentally a matter of developing an attitude of the mind and heart or growing into a posture of relationality in the midst of others. This is a *pastoral disposition* that Seminary education should seek to cultivate among students. This cannot be accomplished in a course or two. Developing a dialogical understanding of ministry

accompanied by a critical theological reflection takes time, and the courses I offer represent a beginning of a journey -- hopefully a life-long journey. Initial steps that students take in engaging in interreligious dialogue are akin to learning to read, equipping oneself with tools that may eventually serve specific purposes in one's future ministry.

What I aim to accomplish is the formation of a dialogical *habitus* in interfaith courses. Though I have not defined the specific dimensions of this *habitus*, in simple terms, it refers to a personal disposition toward the other. I have already alluded to this as an attitude of the mind that is theologically informed and nurtured in relation to people. One of the difficulties that I have observed among students is their inability to be “guests in the midst of others.” Perhaps this may be a particularly an American and Christian problem. There is always an unspoken assumption that the United States is a Christian nation or at least governed by Christian values. Thus the insights and values of other faiths, alien in the American soil, may be interesting and illuminating but are regarded as alien intruders who undermine the traditional American values and culture.

This built-in prejudice among a lot of Americans makes it somewhat difficult for some students to enter into the homes or places of worship of people of other faiths. The fact is that a significant number of religions come from outside the United States and introduce religious practices, beliefs and theological or philosophical commitments that are alien to Western religious and intellectual traditions. The fact that people of other faiths by and large also happen to be people of color requires that students possess not simply religious but also multicultural sensitivities as well. Students have to overcome their fear of the other which is culturally constructed. It is also important to recognize that religious prejudice and cultural prejudice are often intertwined and feed each other. Inherited theological convictions or stereotypical understanding of people from other cultures play a significant part in promoting religious prejudice. Sensitivity toward cultural/racial/ethnic differences and dynamics therefore is indispensable for understanding religious values and beliefs of others. Thus attitudinal changes have to be nurtured carefully if the course is to have any long-term outcomes. For this reason, at LTSP, our Prolog sessions include Anti-racism and Multicultural Awareness workshops required for all students.

The difficulty I have described also stems from certain other Christian convictions. “Hospitality” has become a common theme in

churches wanting to project themselves as welcoming communities eager to expand their membership base. In this environment, dialogue with people of other faiths is frequently understood as a way of hosting people of other faiths in the church or community. The belief that Christians are the hosts and all others are guests is so strongly entrenched in the Christian mind that students have a hard time “learning to be guests” in the company of others. In one of my introductory lectures, I emphasize that in a religiously pluralistic society there are no hosts but rather all people are strangers to one another and in that sense interfaith dialogue and exposure is the *practice of learning to be guests in the midst of others*. This is a different *theology of hospitality* that students have to learn to cultivate and does not come about without practice. Not all students who represent the dominant culture fully grasp the concept of hospitality that I have described. The course is an attempt to help students rethink their theology, especially their theology of grace in our context of religious diversity.

Another major learning difficulty that I have frequently encountered among seminarians has to do with religious language and concepts. I have alluded to this difficulty earlier. Interreligious dialogue in the American context takes place by using English as a mediating language into which religious concepts are translated. When certain words are used in conversation, Christian students are linguistically conditioned to interpret them according to their Christian self-understandings. It is not always easy to get into the conceptual and spiritual world of the other, and students understandably have a tendency to misinterpret or misapprehend religious terms and categories. I have tried to encourage students to adopt a principle of “conceptual humility” that no single tradition solely owns a word, a concept, an idea, an image or a story. Meanings of religious concepts are to be probed carefully in religious traditions for distinct nuances and ideational dimensions even though they may appear the same or similar in the mediating language of dialogue. One must pay careful attention to etymology and historical nuances of religious concepts and language as cultural constructs. The point may seem rather basic to human conversation but conceptual humility obliges one to listen intensely, seeking out a genuine experience of the universe of the other.

The reflection papers students submit often describe their theological journeys while doing this course. For some, getting to know a person(s) of another faith and sincerely exploring religious beliefs and

ideas in a dialogical or comparative way is a theological discovery. For others, seeing the perception of the Christian faith through the eyes of another is revealing. There are always a few students who misconstrue the assignment and engage in an intellectual argument and use the opportunity to evangelize the other. For some, the temptation to claim the superiority of their own faith over against the other is hard to resist. In some instances, students never get to the point of engaging in dialogue, either because the dialogue partner was less proficient in his/her faith or because the seminarian was more interested in gathering information about the other. Thus the course elicits a variety of individual outcomes and learnings in relation to the course objectives.

I have not done a formal follow-up survey or research on the outcomes of this course over a period of time. The Seminary’s periodic alumni survey has not included questions pertaining to interfaith issues. An assessment survey of our graduates is anticipated. In the meantime, an important clue that the course has fulfilled the stated objectives is the calls or emails I get from students long after they have graduated. Sometimes in alumni gatherings, students come up to me and say, “Now I understand, what you said in class about interfaith dialogue!” or, they inform me how they are pursuing conversations with other religious communities in the context of their ministry. Of course, I do get frequent invitations from students to visit their parishes to preach and do an adult class on interfaith issues, and that indicates the importance of the course in Seminary education. I am convinced that at the very least the course opens windows of understanding for many a student to take up the challenge of interfaith reality in our society. Even those students who have differing theological convictions than mine, or represent certain conservative theological traditions, develop some measure of respect for religious traditions other than their own. The range of personal, theological, multi-cultural, interfaith and international experiences that I bring to teaching this course, I believe, does have a bearing on how it impacts students. Interfaith dialogue, both as a theological concern and a pastoral commitment, must be intentionally included in theological curricula of seminaries if we are to take our context of religious plurality seriously.

The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

HTH 363: Theory and Practice of Interreligious Dialogue

Prof. J. Paul Rajashekar

The course is intended to provide a broad exposure to pertinent theological issues in Christian relations with people of other living religions and promote the practice of interreligious dialogue in a religiously pluralistic society. The course, however, is not an introduction to religions of the world. It is assumed that students have a rudimentary knowledge of the beliefs and practices of other living faiths. Students are encouraged to read a good introductory book on world's religions.

Objectives:

1. To understand and explore the reality of religious pluralism in North American society and identify the issues it raises for the Christian faith;
2. To learn the theory and practice of interreligious dialogue;
3. To examine theological models of encounter in Christian history and theology; and
4. Explore practical and pastoral responses to issues in congregational settings and ministry.

Required Texts:

Wesley Ariarajah: Not without My Neighbor (Geneva, WCC. 1999)
 Diana L. Eck: A New Religious America (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 2001).
 Paul F. Knitter: Introducing Theologies of Religions (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 2002).
 Raimon Panikkar: Intrareligious Dialogue, Revised edition (NY: Paulist Press, 1999).

Bibliography:

- Michael von Bruck, *The Unity of Reality: God, God Experience, Meditation in the Hindu Christian-Dialogue* (NY: Paulist Press, 1991).
 David Carpenter, *Revelation, History and the Dialogue of Religions* (NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
 Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God and Christian God: Faith, Reason and Argument in a World of Many Religions* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999).
 Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (NY: Orbis Books, 2000).
 J. A. DeNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1992).
 Dupuis, S.J., Jacques, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (NY: Orbis, 2001).
 P. J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (NY: Orbis, 1991).
 S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches, A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).
 -----, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
 John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (London: SCM Press, 1993).
 John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (NY: Orbis Books, 1987).
 Klaus K. Klostermeyer, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban* (London: SCM Press, 1969).
 George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).
 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism : The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).
 David J. Krieger, *The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology* (NY: Orbis Books, 1991).
 Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (London: SCM Press, 1991).
 Theodore M. Ludwig, *The Sacred Paths, Understanding the Religions of the World* (NY: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1989).
 Mays, Rebecca Kratz, *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grassroots* (Philadelphia, Ecumenical Press, Temple University, 2009)

- H. A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmanns, 1991).
- Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (NY: Orbis Books, 1988).
- Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ and Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (NY: Orbis, 1991).
- Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*, John Paul's *Redemptoris Missio*; CDF's *Dominus Jesus*, all downloadable documents.
- Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).
- WCC, *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions*, downloadable document.

Course Requirements:

1. Regular class attendance, fulfillment of required readings and participation in class and small group discussions. Grade 20%.
2. A reflection paper (15-20 pages, double-spaced) based on an encounter or dialogue with a person(s) of another living faith. The paper is not intended as a verbatim report of conversations but rather a "reflection" on your encounter with the other person's beliefs, religious practices, social values, including issues affecting his/her religious community. The paper should articulate significant learnings on your part as a result of your conversations. If you have an opportunity to visit or observe the worship service of another religious tradition, write down your personal observations as well. Your reflections should indicate points of contact or conflict between your faith and the faith of the other. You are encouraged to engage in a *dialogue* with others and not in a *debate* about truth claims! Spend at least 3-4 hours in conversation in order to get a feel for the faith of the other, preferably meeting more than once. Grade 50%.
3. Identify an issue (such as interfaith marriage, prayer, funeral, counseling, etc.) and write a brief paper (5-7 pages) on a pastoral response from your perspective. You are encouraged to consult with religious leaders who have encountered practical interfaith issues in their ministry. Grade 30%

Class Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction to the course, readings and assignments.

Lecture: Religious Pluralism in America: The Changing Landscape
Small group discussion

Week 2: Religious Pluralism discussion...contd.

Read: Diana Eck, *A New Religious America*
Small group discussion

Week 3: Interreligious Dialogue: Responses from churches

Lecture: Ecumenical Discussions on Interfaith Dialogue
Read appropriate articles: <http://www.pluralism.org/index.php>
World Council of Churches: "Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions" (read the entire document): <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/glines-e.html#2>
Small group discussion

Week 4: Issues in Interreligious Dialogue: Discussion on Ariarajah's book

Lecture: Ecumenical Discussions...contd.
Read: National Council of Churches USA statement on interfaith relations:
<http://www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifr.html>
Vatican II document "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*):
<http://www.cin.org/v2non.html>
Small group discussion

Week 5: Issues in Interreligious Dialogue... contd.

Read: Raimon Pannikar, *Intrareligious Dialogue*
Lecture: Rules and Goals of Dialogue
Small group discussion

Week 6: Models of Encounter: Replacement and Fulfillment

Read: Knitter, pp. 1-106
Lecture: History of Christian Encounter with other faiths: Early Christian experiences
Small group discussion

Week 7: Models of Encounter: Replacement and Fulfillment...contd.

Lecture: History of Christian Encounter... Medieval and Reformation experiences
Small group discussion

Week 8: Mutuality Model

Read: Knitter, pp. 109-169
Lecture: Modern Missionary Encounters: Experiences from India
Small group discussion

Week 9: Mutuality Model... contd.

Lecture: Contemporary Encounters...Fundamentalism, and Radical Islam
Sample readings from sacred texts (handout).
Small group discussion

Week 10: Acceptance Model

Read: Knitter, pp. 173-246
Lecture: The Problem of Scripture in a Multi-scriptural Society
Browse: "Windows for Understanding" (ELCA):
<http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/interreligious/windows.html>
Small group discussion

Week 11: Acceptance Model...contd.

Lecture: Lutheran Theological Perspectives
Presentation of selected dialogical encounters by students
Plenary discussion

Week 12: Review of the course...evaluation of objectives

Presentation of selected pastoral issues by students
Plenary discussion

Seminary Policies: Students are to adhere to seminary policies (class attendance, plagiarism, electronic submission of papers, course extensions, etc) as indicated in the *Student Handbook*. The instructor is available for individual consultation by appointment.