Note: This article includes the main idea and several paragraphs of my doctoral dissertation, “Theopoetic Education: Interreligious Learning and Multiplicity.” (Claremont School of Theology, 2017).

Embodying “Living Together”: An Exploration of Interreligious Education with Relationalism

Abstract

This essay examines theoretical aspects of interreligious education. One of the problems found is that the effects of and rationale for that kind of education are often explained with an essentialist approach that highlights the fixed essence of the religion and underlines the utter differences among and separations between religions and identities. This approach invisibilizes individuals, excludes idiosyncrasy of individuals’ religious identities, and un-invites non-conventional religious populations. Moreover, it generates a discrepancy between the aim of the education (“living together”) and its achievement (“a separate identity”). A relational approach based on the logic of multiplicity, however, provides alternate ways to overcome these problems and reframe interreligious education. In this approach, the education values idiosyncratic individual religious identity and invites all religious and non-religious people. It also facilitates the experience of embodying “living together” internally and externally.

Introduction

A relational approach to interreligious education helps us envision an education that invites all and facilitates them to embody “living together.” I emphasize this point in contrast to an essentialist approach whose core value is standalone. This essentialist approach does not offer an adequate philosophical framework for “living together.” In this approach, “living together” may be politically correct, but an optional way of being that applies to limited groups only. However, for relationalists whose core value is togetherness, “living together” is normative and imperative for being, and creates room for everyone to embody “living together.”

This paper attempts to analyze the problems of an essentialist approach to interreligious education and tries to reframe it with a relational approach. To do so, I first introduce the context within which I discuss interreligious education. In this part, I speak from the perspective of the field of religious education and deal with this subject matter in relation to the works of scholars such as Mary C. Boys and Sara S. Lee, Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, and Eboo Patel. Following that, I provide an explanation for how an essentialist approach is at play in the discourse and what problems are entailed in that approach. In this part, I focus mostly on the
“safety/danger” mentality that appears when people encounter the proposal of interreligious education. I analyze that embedded in that mentality is an essentialist mind, which invisibilizes religious subjectivity of individuals, excludes people with non-conventional religious identities, and contains self-contradiction regarding the goal of the education (“living together”). After this analysis, I propose a relational approach that is based on a philosophy of multiplicity. This approach views both religious identity and religion as multiplicity which is a composite of many things and constantly moves with their internal and external interactions. Also, it accepts “living together” as a natural mode of being and living. Finally, I project that a relational approach can make the education humanizing, all-inviting, and self-consistent.

I embark on this work with a strong conviction that this research would benefit a large audience of people who are living in the middle of religious diversity and their leaders who are responsible for providing an effective education for them. This paper will help them understand how the educator’s philosophical view—in this case, a metaphysical and epistemological view—makes the education different. My hope is that the readers find a better way to serve people with a relational approach.

Learning in the Presence of the Other: A Brief Sketch of Interreligious Education

To explore interreligious education from a relational approach, the first task needed is to clarify the meaning of interreligious education in the context we are discussing. Here, what I focus on is not interreligious learning, which dates to ancient times. My discussion is centered on interreligious education as an intentional educational activity, which has been discussed in the field of religious education roughly since the 1990s.

One of the key characteristics of this educational model is that participants are invited to come with their own religious identities and are explicitly encouraged to engage with those who have other religious identities. In this education, participants are generally expected to do two things: to learn from the other and to learn with the other. The other here usually means the one whose religion is different from mine, but it also includes atheists, “nones” (those who do not identify with any religion), and SBNR (spiritual but not religious).

Mary C. Boys and Sara S. Lee describe this educational model as “learning in the presence of the other.” In 1996, Boys and Lee first published their groundbreaking article in the Journal of Religious Education, reporting what they discovered as a result of their two-year-and-eight-month project of interreligious education with Catholic and Jewish people. Their finding was clear: it is interreligious education that can help people overcome “an intolerant fundamentalism” and “a religious indifference” which they thought the unhealthiest responses to religious diversity in America. After ten years, they co-authored a book, Christians and Jews in Dialogue (2006), and described interreligious learning as “a form of interreligious dialogue emphasizing study in the presence of the other and an encounter with the tradition that the other embodies.”

Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook articulates the purpose of interreligious education as “[acquiring] the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to interact, understand, and communicate with persons from diverse religious traditions; to function effectively in the midst of religious pluralism; and to create pluralistic democratic communities that work for the common good.” In other words, the purpose of interreligious education is to learn in the presence of the other how to live together. In this respect, the educational content is not limited to the doctrines and histories of the other religion. Interreligious education enables participants to meet and learn the whole self of the other. Participants are encouraged to come into this education with their own religious identities as well as their many other identities in relation to culture, gender, class, history, etc. This is a clear difference from monoreligious education in that one religion is central and other religions are objectified to be learned, and multireligious education in that each distantiates oneself from one’s own identity and attempts to gain an objective knowledge of other religions from a neutral perspective. In interreligious education, all are invited to come as whole selves and become both teachers to and learners from others.

The research history of interreligious education is not too long, although the history of (unintended and unconscious) interreligious learning is much longer. It was only during the 1930s and 1940s that scholars, such as Adelaide Teague Case and Norma H. Thompson, began to focus on religious education in a religiously and socially pluralistic society. The earliest modern researcher I found who studied interreligious education is Henry E. Kagan. He, as a Jewish Rabbi and psychologist, conducted interreligious education with Christian youth in the 1950s. Along with the rise of religious pluralism, European scholars such as Karl E. Nipkow (Germany) and Marius C. Felderhof (England) have conducted research on religious education in relation to religious pluralism, and envisioned interreligious education as a future model.

Nipkow’s sketch about the beginning of interreligious education provides a helpful guide to understand how it started in a global context:

Under the influence of the ecumenical movement and in particular since the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1975 in Nairobi, Kenya, the concept of ‘ecumenical education’ has been brought to the fore. In addition to this, both the slow, but steady changes towards multi-cultural societies and influences from Eastern religious traditions have led to the educational goal of promoting ‘inter-religious education’ and ‘inter-religious dialogue’.

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4 Ibid., 6.
It is not surprising that interreligious education grew with interreligious dialogue, for both were also affected by the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, they are inseparable by nature. Leonard Swidler claims that the general goal of interreligious dialogue is “to learn and to change,” which is so educational! Interreligious dialogue is, as Boys and Lee mention, a kind of interreligious education, and also vice versa.

In 2000’s first decade and after, scholars including Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, Judith Berling, Eboo Patel, as well as Boys and Lee have published articles and books particularly on interreligious education. Their questions were all similar to this: “In a world that is increasingly religiously diverse, and increasingly fraught with a ‘clash of civilizations’ narrative, what is the imperative on Religious Education to tell a different story?” Their answer in common is interreligious education. It is to learn from genuine relationship and real experience of the real other, rather than to gain simple information or objectified knowledge of the other. It is to promote learning by having the presence of the other in me and being present in the other.

Is it Safe?: An Essentialist Mind Lurking Under the Surface

When interreligious education is proposed to a community, one of the most frequently asked questions is “Is it safe?” People ask whether this educational model would be something “safe” to apply to their community. With this question they are not asking about physical safety, although that is sometimes an important matter. What they are asking is whether their present religious identity would be properly protected or not.

At the root of this “safety-danger” mentality is essentialist thinking. Essentialism is a view that all things have their own essences; all things must seek their “natural kinds,” to be themselves. Stephen Fuchs, a sociologist, articulates that essentialism views these essences as “independent of relationships, context, time, or observer.” With the essences, things can be what they are regardless of time, location, and relation with neighboring objects. From this perspective, metaphysically, things do not need others to be themselves, and epistemologically, things do not need others to be known. Things are what they are because of what they have in themselves, and things are knowable only through what they have in themselves. The energy of essentialism is, therefore, inward, for knowing the intrinsic essences most correctly. That is the best way to know things most correctly. In this regard, Fuchs contends that the mode of essentialism is “closure” because in that way things can safely “isolate and shelter...basic certainties and natural kinds” from external factors.

In essentialism, if essences are missing or changed, things are considered impaired or corrupted – therefore, in danger. Activities such as interaction or engagement is neither preferred nor necessitated. Such activities are considered as potential threats that may make any

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10 Ibid., 12–13.
11 Ibid., 16–17.
impact on the essences of things. In this respect, it is a fearful action for essentialist-minded people to interact with religious others, because this action may influence their religious identity. If any influence shakes the status quo of their religious identity, they see it as “dangerous” for it puts things in danger of losing their identities.

In the minds of those who ask for the “safety” of interreligious education, this essentialist thinking is at work. Their answers may be different, as in yes, no, or I’m not sure, but their internal, normative question is the same. Is this a “safe” education? Does this education properly protect the essence of the self and the religion or harm them? Those who decide to support and advocate interreligious education with an essentialist mind would say, “Yes, this education is safe. This education will actually deepen your particularity and enhance your understanding of the other.” Those who decide to disagree with an essentialist approach would say, “No, this education is dangerous. This education will tear your identity into pieces and remake you into a syncretic self! You will lose you.” Those who fail to make a decision with an essentialist approach are the ones who are not sure whether their identity will be strengthened or distorted.

A problem of this essentialist perspective is invisiblization of individuals. This perspective presupposes interreligious education as an education between religions rather than an education between religious people. For them, the essence of Christianity, for example, is fixed, invariable, and shared with all other Christians. Likewise, the essence of Buddhism is regarded as fixed, invariable, and shared with all other Buddhists. Thus, with this view, interreligious education for Christians and Buddhists is interpreted as an education between the Christianity and the Buddhism, which is a hollow illusion. This is a problem because human beings precede religion. Religion is an abstract, while people are concrete. The function of religious education is expected to reproduce sameness. The goal of Christian education is then to grow as many people as possible who have the same identity, and so is the essentialist goal of Buddhist education, Jewish education, and so forth.

An essentialist approach also assumes one’s religious identity as categorical. By this assumption, the participants of the education are categorized into one of the participating religions. Interreligious education that presupposes an education between religions and invites the participants as subordinate members of a particular religion comes to emphasize the nature of interreligious education as informative and dialectical, because what the participant gains will be correct knowledge about the representative ideas of the other religion and the ability to respond to that knowledge by representing one’s own religion. If this essentially minded education speaks about transformation, it means correction to the essence. Such an interreligious education also justifies the rationale of interreligious education as ethical and politically correct, for it believes that past massive violence related to religion was caused by misinformation about the other religion, including misunderstanding, prejudice, and indifference.

It is partly right that misunderstanding, prejudice, and indifference were the basis in many cases for religion-related violence. However, it is questionable whether interreligious education that helps the participants gain the “correct knowledge” of the other religion will reduce such violence. What if that “correctly understood” knowledge of Islam, for example, is accepted as “incorrect” by Hinduism? Will such an effort of interreligious education be a solution to violence? One can also ask what would be next, once participants gain the full “correct knowledge” of the other religion? Will there be any more reason to meet, interact, and learn? Will the religions accomplish “living together” after all? If so, how? What will sustain
that “living together”? Furthermore, if interreligious education assumes the participants as subcategories of religion, is it just to categorize Coptic Christians as separate from Egyptian and Christian Universalists from the United States into one group that shares the same essence for their religious identity? How about those who are “in-between” or have “religious hybridity”? Even if two people come from the same religious tradition, are they the same in terms of their religious experiences and identities? Also, I raise a question whether interreligious education can be truly an education between religions. What is the essence of Christianity? What is the essence of Hinduism? Is an essence truly an essence?

More importantly, if interreligious education is an activity that helps each religion correct itself to the essence of itself, will this education truly be able to accomplish “living together” after all? Furthermore, how can the philosophy whose core idea is standalone be used to support “living together” which refers not merely to co-living but also to interdependent and interrelated living?

The tendency of essentialism in theories and practices of interreligious education is such an important and urgent issue that it cannot be overlooked. Without correctly answering those questions raised above, the practitioners (the “yes” group) will be unclear at some point of the education, the hesitant (the “not sure” group) will be still hesitant, and the opponents (the “no” group) will continue to oppose. It is time that we need a new paradigm that assists the practitioners to rest assured, the hesitant to move forward to the beauty of interreligious learning, and the opponents to question what they have been believing “right” for a long time.

Philosophy of Multiplicity: A Relational Approach

As a strong proponent of interreligious education, I urge a different paradigm to interpret and reconstruct interreligious education. That is relationalism. With this approach, we can assist the current practitioners to rest assured, the hesitant to move forward to the beauty of interreligious learning, and the opponents to question what they have been believing “right” for a long time.

It is not a surprise that we have countless definitions of relationalism, but we can start from some of the general assumptions shared in relational theories. First of all, relationalism assumes that things are necessarily related to other things. Stephen Fuchs, a sociologist, articulates the metaphysics of relationalism as follows: “Things are what they are because of their location and movement in a network or system of forces.”12 According to this assumption, things are always in between particular spaces and times, having their own particular space and time. The realness of things comes from this “in-between” nature. Therefore, things are never the “shadows of Ideas” but univocal and real events.

Second, relationalism implies that things are by nature dialogical and fluid. Things are neither static nor closed, but engage with others with openness and changeability. They influence and are influenced by others. This point presupposes that things are basically outcomes of the dialogical relationship among previous beings and become sources for coming beings. Thus, nothing exists alone nor can be perceived alone. Rigid categorization and classification do not work. Things are discussable and knowable only when it is known how things are related to others.

12 Ibid., 16.
The concept of multiplicity, based on process philosophy and poststructuralism, provides a helpful explanation about relationalism. First, Laurel Schneider articulates multiplicity as follows:

It bears repeating here that “multiplicity” is not the same as “the many.” It does not refer to a pile of many separable units, many “ones,” and so it is not opposed to the One or to ones. “The multiple” (it is ironic how the English language seems to want to make it into a singularity), or “multiplicity,” results when things—ones—so constitute each another that they come to exist (in part, of course) because of one another.”

Multiplicity is different from mere manyness. The concept of multiplicity highlights the interrelated and interdependent nature of things. This means that others are necessary for things to come into existence and to be perceived.

Alfred North Whitehead explains this nature of multiplicity with this famous quote: “The many become one, and are increased by one.” According to this quote, first, the one (a thing) consists of the many. This means that its essence is not original and intrinsic. Second, the one that is a set of the many becomes a part of the many again by adding the self to the existing many. In this worldview, things have emerged and are still influencing and being influenced in this interrelated and interdependent relationship. Nothing is disconnected from and independent of the other. Nor has a thing a good rationale to advocate the need of complete closure of the system to keep its identity safe and sustainable. For it is their reciprocal relationships with others that have formed, sustained, and rejuvenated things.

This relational approach based on the concept of multiplicity provides a new framework. First, in this approach, a religious identity is a multiplicity. In an essentialist view, a religious identity is considered as a particularity that is defined in conjunction with universality. In other words, if someone is Presbyterian, his or her religious identity belongs to the Presbyterian identity which belongs to the Christian identity. His or her religious identity would be understood as a subset of a greater category. However, a multiplicity never fully belongs to any upper category. One’s religious identity is asymmetric, rhizomatic, and irreducible, which cannot be explained with an overarching “shape” or “story.” Any categorization of one’s religious identity entails a certain extent of reduction and removal, which is injustice to the person. According to the philosophy of multiplicity, one’s religious identity consists of various elements and experiences, which makes it unique and univocal.

Second, the same principle is applied to a religion: A religion is a multiplicity. In this case, a religion is a gathering of many religious identities, which is, therefore, a multiplicity of multiplicities. Doctrines and confessions need to be understood inductively rather than deductively. This means that they – doctrines and confessions – need to be understood as outcomes of people’s religious identities, which inevitably cuts here and there to generalize, rather than the pre-given standard that measures and judges people’s religious identities. In  

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multiplicity, religion is, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith maintains, the “cumulative tradition.” In Korean Catholic tradition, for example, the religious identities of those who fought the government, were martyred by the Japanese imperial military, condemned by local superstitions, and took care of orphans and widows during the war are all cumulated. Not only Christian teachings but also social contexts, experiences, events, and many others constitute what can be called a Korean Catholic tradition. This tradition is also located in between other traditions side by side, inseparably, where they mutually and constantly interact with one another.

Lastly, this approach affirms “living together” as a natural mode of being and living, while essentialism claims “standalone” as a default mode of being and living. In multiplicity, there are three types of “living together”: internal togetherness, external togetherness, and mutual immanence. First, it is internal togetherness that the many are in one. Second, it is external togetherness that the one becomes one of the many. Third, it is mutual immanence that one is in the other and the other is in one. In this approach, “living together” is neither an abstract slogan nor political correctness. We, all creatures, live together literally and metaphysically. We, all creatures, live together internally, externally, and mutually. It is the default mode of living that you are in me, and I am in you. Any effort to defy this natural rule entails violence.

Toward Education for Living Together

A relational approach based on multiplicity provides a helpful guidance to interreligious education, so it can overcome essentialist problems and move forward to embodying its ultimate vision of “living together.”

First, a relational approach creates a humanizing education. This approach objects interreligious education to be an education between religions, because, from a perspective of multiplicity, no religious identities are the same even though they claim to belong to the same religion. This perspective rather alerts one to the fact that it is an illusion if someone claims an education in which five Christians and five Muslims learn together as an education between Christianity and Islam. Such an education is simply an education for ten religious people, of which five people claim to be Christian and five claim to be Muslim. A relational approach would reveal that it is not learning the story of Islam but learning five different stories of Islamic faith that five people who claim to be Christian learn from five people who claim to be Muslim. A relational approach would also encourage five people who claim to be Christian to learn from one another, for their stories would surprise one another as well with strangeness and unfamiliarity.

Second, a relational approach creates room for all who want to join interreligious education and promote “living together.” Especially with the theory of external togetherness, the boundary of a religion is blurred. Dualism that distinguishes the “in” and the “out” has no place to stand. The theory of multiplicity, especially the theory of internal togetherness, ontologically opens up a space for multiple religious belongings and those who are syncretized.

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“in-between” two or more religions. They are the ones who have no space in an essentialist approach. They are those who have been ignored, uninvited, and ill-portrayed by the assertions such as “Interreligious education is an education between religions,” or “the first and most important prerequisite of interfaith is faith.” However, a relational approach affirms their existence and invites them as equally as it does to those who adhere to traditionally identified religions.

Third, a relational approach enables interreligious education to envision embodying “living together.” The point is that the education seeks the embodiment of “living together” by participants during the education and among themselves. In this approach, interreligious education is not a preparatory education, but an experiential education. Participants learn “living together” not by knowledge but by experience. This education would consider the gathering of participants as a community, not simply as a gathering of multiple individuals or an encounter between two or more religions. Their interacting with one another is a process of increasing their interconnectedness and mutual immanence, which is a way of an embodiment of “living together.” This approach enables interreligious education to see and affirm that the process of the education consists of the experiences of “living together.” This approach makes interreligious education focus on the process of learning within individuals as well. After the interactions, participants are filled with otherness provided by other participants. The sources of otherness include the texts, cultures, confessions, and others. In the relational approach, the process of the participants dialoging with this otherness inside them is an internal “living together,” which interreligious education would highlight and encourage.

Boys and Lee emphasize that “process is the key element in all interreligious learning.” They continue, “Interreligious learning aims to go deeper by fostering relationship among participants, and with key texts, practice, and beliefs of the other’s tradition.” They do not add a philosophical examination to this statement. However, they point to the important aspects of interreligious education discussed above. As Boys and Lee point out, a relational approach to interreligious education affirms that process is the key element in interreligious education in terms of which the process is “living together.” This approach encourages participants to have a relationship with other participants and other texts, practices, and beliefs during the education, because that is the way we go into the other, and the other comes into us, embodying “living together” within and between us.

Conclusion

We have examined so far how a relational approach helps interreligious education overcome the problems of an essentialist approach and envision an embodiment of “living together.” The problems of the essentialist approach include invisiblization of human beings over religions, exclusion of idiosyncrasies of religious identities and spiritualities, and incompatibility between its theory (separation) and practice (togetherness). A relational approach helps us overcome those problems by drawing attention to concreteness (people) from concept (religion). In this

17 Boys and Lee, Christians and Jews in Dialogue, 96.
18 Ibid.
way, interreligious education welcomes all people regardless of their religions. Moreover, this approach provides theoretical affirmation and interpretation on “living together.” In this approach, “living together” is lived, not only externally but also internally.

Some may question how this theoretical “living together” can affect our “living together” in real life. One way to answer these questions is to reexamine the meaning of “living together.” “Living together” is certainly not mere coexistence in that many exist without dialogue or connectedness. That is “living concurrently.” Nor “living together” mean simply having events of encounter. No matter how many and how often those events happen, that amounts to no more than “meeting together.” “Living together” means to share life. There are two ways to share life. One is to bring the other into myself. The other is to send myself into the other. In doing so, the other becomes, as Raimon Panikkar articulates, “the counterpart of the I” and “belonging to the I (and not as not-I).”19 “Living together” is to be part of the other and to invite the other to be part of myself. “Living together” means to become the We, in which the other and I are different but not separate. The We is a community with a common destiny. If one dies, then the other dies. If one lives, then the other lives. The key of the relational approach to interreligious education is to assist participants to form and experience this sense of the We. Once this education is successfully done, one would not harm the other; because one knows that to harm the other is to harm oneself.

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