Decolonizing Interreligious Education as Resistance Against White Normativity

Abstract

Common ground has been commonly used as the basis for interreligious engagement and dialogue. However, behind this concept lies Christian supremacy, the theology that gave birth to the ideology of white hegemony. It is through decolonizing interreligious education, this paper argues, that Christian supremacy, white privilege, and dominant narratives will be challenged at the intersection of education, politics, race, power, plurality, and multi-religious narratives in a brave new third-space.

Keywords: decolonizing, interreligious, common ground, white normativity, third-space.

A. Introduction

Religious plurality is everywhere, and, as notes by Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, “the United States is one of the most religiously pluralistic countries in the world.”¹ Therefore, religious education in America should cross religious boundaries. Kujawa-Holbrook claims that there should be an interreligious approach to this education, and, further, she believes that interreligious learning must take place in all religious organizations across the United States.

With regard to interreligious engagement, the tragedy of September 11, 2001, provides important background. As argued by Judith Berling, it stunned the Americans with a striking reminder that religious differences and misunderstandings can lead to acts of massive violence, which, in that case, took thousands of innocent lives. Using this as an important piece of historical context, Berling claims that American Christians need to extend a hand of friendship and express Christian regard for all people worldwide.² Here, Berling builds her argument for interreligious education on the acknowledgment that Americans hold a prominent position in the world and that Christians hold an important position amongst religions in the United States. I find this problematic. On one hand, it is understandable, because she draws from a Christian perspective, as well as from a Christian majority context. However, on the other hand, can effective interreligious dialogue and education aimed at peace, harmony, liberation, or reconciliation start with the assumption of the supremacy of one country and one religion over others? Berling possibly refers to the need to recognize the power imbalance between countries and between religions to start interreligious engagement. Hence, I believe that interreligious


engagement/education must start with a recognition of the equality between all religions, as well as between all parts of the world, not only a tolerance of difference. Kwok Pui-Lan affirms this, stating that religious tolerance opens the gate for interaction but not for equality.\(^3\) Tolerance holds the superiority of one over another. Therefore, we should be more than just tolerant of one another in this multicultural world.

In accordance with this, Leonard Swidler asserts that one of the important principles or rules of dialogue is equality. He says, “dialogue can take place only between equals.”\(^4\) He then elaborates that in an authentic interreligious dialogue among religions, both partners must come mainly to learn from each other, which will happen only when they speak “equal with equal.” Consequently, any aspect of inequality caused by the presumed supremacy of one religion or one race over the other(s) should not characterize interreligious dialogue/education.

Arguing for the need to decolonize interfaith engagement, in her dissertation proposal, Teresa Crist states that “the status-quo position of Christianity in the West has led to an unexamined discourse of interfaith/interreligious interaction that promotes exclusion and surface-level engagement, impediments the ultimate aims of interfaith interaction.”\(^5\) In her description, she critiques the idea of “common ground” which has been the basis of the interreligious engagement and dialogue. Crist draws from the work of Paul Knitter, in which Knitter asserts that without serious attention to difference, common ground often results in imperialism.\(^6\) Emphasizing and normalizing similarities as the basis for conversation can be dangerous. Knitter states that “Christians embracing a pluralist model for dialogue can be transformed, usually unwittingly, into imperialist or manipulators not only in the way they talk about ‘the one God’ within all religions but also in the way they talk about the one dialogue that must occupy all religions.”\(^7\) Knitter then warns of the danger of becoming a dominant party amidst diversity; an imperialist instead of a pluralist in an effort to find common ground.

Behind the concept of common ground lies Christianity supremacy, the theology that gave birth to the ideology of white supremacy.\(^8\) Jeannine Hill Fletcher asserts that “Whiteness” and “Christianness” have become two pillars of the dominant religion. Looking back at the history, there was a time when conversion to Christianity made people appear to be more white. The Whiteness itself continues to reproduce in everyday narratives. Therefore, the narratives used as the starting places for interreligious engagement are often purported to be universal lexicons, ideas, and concepts, when, in fact, they are imposed by the dominant tradition. Consequently, general ideas and concepts in interreligious education, as well as similarities related to the notion of common ground, need to be contested and questioned because they are often indebted to Christianity and dominant Western narratives.

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\(^7\) Knitter, *One Earth*, 44.

Furthermore, it is essential to unpack concepts such as peace, reconciliation, and love, as they relate to interreligious education. Who determines the meaning of these terms? Whose narratives are used? How does the cultural foundation of Christianity in the West, in its position of power, influence interreligious education? How can interreligious education effectively address Christian supremacy and White normativity? To address this, I see the need to decolonize interreligious education by examining its underlying power structures, languages, narratives, and assumptions. This should be done with all aspects of interreligious curricula, implicit, explicit, and null. We need more than religious education in the American context; we need decolonizing interreligious education. Through this, Christian supremacy and White privilege will truly be challenged and questioned as they intersect with race, power dynamics, pluralism/diversity, and multi-religious narratives in the brave new third-space that is created.

For this paper, I will use postcolonialism as my lens, as it examines and questions dominant narratives of oppression. It addresses the notion of religion as a social construction and provides a third space for engagement. This space is a brave space for education where hybridity and inter-subjectivity are celebrated; where power relations and dynamics are acknowledged. It is a site of complex struggle and of meaning-making that allows both the educator and student to reimagine and re-conceptualize their identities as they deal with white normativity in all its forms.

The specific methodology that I will employ is a literature-based review and analysis. The first category of literature that I will consider focuses on is interreligious education and the second is related to white supremacy. The scholars whose work I will examine in relation to interreligious education are Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, Diana L. Eck, Judith Berling, Paul Knitter, Najeewa Syeed-Miller, and Carl Sterkens. I will also examine the work of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and their project entitled Peaceworks that is presented in a report edited by David R. Smock. This will be the first part of my paper. The research of Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Robin DiAngelo, Tomoko Masuzawa, and others will be used in my effort to connect Christian supremacy and white privilege to interreligious education. Finally, after arguing for the importance of decolonizing interreligious education, I will highlight some of its practical implications.

B. Religious or Interreligious Education?

In the pluralistic context of America, where there is a rapidly growing level of religious diversity, interreligious education is necessary. Religious education should include an interreligious curriculum. In Carl Sterken’s argument, there should be an interreligious model of religious education for a context where plurality is inescapable. Sterkens discusses the context of the primary education in the western society, where he further argues that religious education is a religious communication and, therefore, it needs an interreligious model. Based on his research, religious testimony remains possible in this interreligious model of religious education. Thus, instead of a monoreligious or multireligious model, it provides an interreligious model for the western society which is characterized by the increasing plurality of religions and world-views. For him, these three approaches relate to specific theological premises and focus on different goals. They are the products of a specific social context. Thus, to answer the needs of the current context of the plurality of the western society, the interreligious model is a perfect fit.

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Hence, I argue that this model is not only relevant in the setting of primary education, but also in other settings, such as in a theological education and a faith community.

“God Beyond Borders” by Kujawa-Holbrook is based on a decade of research and argues for interreligious learning among faith communities in the United States. She describes how faith communities across America are looking for their specific ways to deal with plurality in the context of interreligious learning. Diana L. Eck’s “A New Religious America,” written sixteen years prior to the work of Kujawa-Holbrook, introduces America as the most religiously diverse nation in the entire world. She comes to the conclusion that it is necessary to build bridges in the newly multi-religious nation of America. She acknowledges that encounters that happen among different religions are often full of fear, conflict, and tension, and, many times, ended in vandalism and violence. For Eck, rather than ignoring the plurality of America, the bridge should be built upon many differences. Yet, “the story of the new religious America is an unfinished story, with both national and global implications.” This means that the struggle is still taking place to determine the identity of this nation anew in the midst of cultural and religious diversity. Therefore, interreligious engagement and education are critically important for the American context.

What is interreligious education? How do we understand it? There are not so many scholarly works that explicitly describes this enterprise. Thus, the term interreligious education may overlap with interreligious engagement, interreligious dialogue, and interreligious learning. These four terms, including interreligious education, have different emphasizes. For the purpose of this paper, while I understand that these terms are somewhat parallel and they overlap one another, I refer specifically to interreligious education. Here, education relates to or focuses on the intentional aspect of an interreligious learning or engagement.

In Berling’s effort to provide a guide for interreligious education from a Christian theological education perspective, she does not offer a working definition of an interreligious education. However, she recognizes that it relates to understanding other religious worlds. In accordance with this, John Borelli asserts that interreligious refers to the relations and outreach between and among members of different religious traditions. Here, interreligious education teaches the students to humbly recognize the failings of their own traditions so that they can begin to see the goodness that might be found in others. It also teaches the students to appreciate the goodness in their own traditions and to accept with love the failings of others. Gloria Durka contends that the term ‘inter’ in an interreligious approach means understanding one’s own religious position in relation to other religious possibilities. Hence, interreligious learning includes the interreligious dialogue tradition as well as additional approaches, especially in religious education. Therefore, interreligious approaches and religious education become inseparable.

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10 Kujawa-Holbrook, God Beyond, 1.
11 Eck, A New, 1.
12 Eck, A New, 335, 385.
16 Kujawa-Holbrook, God Beyond, 6.
Interreligious learning/education is an interdisciplinary approach and an emerging discipline that answers the needs of a pluralistic society, argues Kujawa-Holbrook. She states that it aims to help participants acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to interact, understand, and communicate with persons from diverse religious traditions. Interreligious learning in an educational setting begins with stories and identifying shared values. It values cultural differences and religious pluralism amongst the learners. It also challenges discrimination and addresses intolerance and oppression. Interreligious learning values cultural differences and religious plurality. Kujawa-Holbrook further mentions that one of the important skills it requires is the ability to analyze the power and to open to structural equality, as well as to engage in the redistribution of power. Yet, what she missed in her argument is the issue of capitalism, which is very important in discussing education, including an interreligious education, in the present context of America.

Capitalism is an ideology that is present in or affects many aspects of life, including education. In a capitalist education system, profit or capital plays an important role. Here, students or learners become a commodity and education becomes a privilege. Sarah Knopp and Jeff Bale argue that the schools in America are designed to serve the needs of capitalism, that is, a system organized for the purpose of profit. They, therefore, suggest a change in action so that the students can be liberated. This is helpful, not only for education in general but also for interreligious education. This based on the opinion that capitalism affects education, as well as that it relates to religion and interreligious engagement.

In a report about the works done by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), there are seven case studies provided about the stories of religious communities and leaders all over the world joining together to resolve conflicts that are at least partially rooted in religion. It gave me the impression that the USIP has helped many nations in dealing with their particular religious conflicts. The case studies are about faith-based peacemaking, where intra-religious and interreligious dialogue is important. Furthermore, the cases demonstrate that, without credible local partners, no international actor, in this case, the USIP, has a chance of making much of a contribution to conflict resolution, and so local institutions should provide guidance on the most effective methodologies. Yet, who benefits from the conflict and who is responsible for the conflict in the first place? Furthermore, the funds allocated to facilitate these projects are huge. This leads to another important concern regarding the relationship between interreligious engagement and capitalism, as well as with imperialism of the West to the East. What lesson does this project offer to the effort of an interreligious engagement and education that is taking place in the multicultural context of America where privilege remains, discrimination happens, white supremacy exists, and white normativity rules? Is finding a common ground as the foundation of interreligious engagement effective enough to address these issues?

Common ground is surely something to pursue in interreligious engagement. However, often this pursuit is relevant only amongst the Abrahamic religions, where Muslim, Christian, and Jews look to Abraham as the father of the covenant between God and God’s people, and as a

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friend of God. Paul L. Heck claims that insight into the possible common ground between Christianity and Islam will provide direction for wider discussion. He further contends that religious pluralism that is focused on finding the common ground between the Abrahamic religions, primarily Christianity and Islam, will cause greater understanding. He missed acknowledging that it can also result in Christian supremacy. Here, Christianity through the search for common ground determines the category of religion in general, which is problematic. It reflects the superiority of Christianity over other religions and other faith traditions.

The idea of common ground as the basis of interreligious engagement may help to initiate conversation and dialogue, but without discerning differences, it will lead to imperialism. Crist contends that many interfaith or interreligious programs in the United States look for connection in similarity and ignore the differences. Often times, the similarity is produced by using the ideology of one world religion, primarily Protestant Christianity. Therefore, how can interreligious education effectively address this instance of white supremacy and its normativity? As I argue throughout this paper, it is through decolonizing interreligious education.

C. Interreligious Education and White Normativity

Any form of interreligious education that ignores the matters of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism is a colonized form. When interreligious education exists within a superiority-based and colonial approach to the many social issues, especially discrimination, injustice, and violence, there is the need for decolonizing. People who believe and participate in an interreligious engagement or education must stand uncompromisingly against the empire, the capitalist system, and the white supremacy.

White supremacy and Christianity have long fed and supported one another. This had led to many things including discrimination of different others and violence. Sadly, there are still many people who do not believe in the existence and the influence of white supremacy and its normativity. I once shared my personal opinion regarding the close connection between Christianity and white supremacy in a classroom setting and one of my friends who is Caucasian felt offended. She said that white supremacy is not real and that it is dangerous to generalize and blame all white people. I was shocked and speechless but soon realized that not all people understand what white supremacy means and how its normativity has negatively influenced America as a nation, and the world. It has become a kind of norm that is invisible to some people. It manifests as “unconscious and invisible ideas and practices that make whiteness appear natural and light.” This classroom experience that I had parallels what Robin DiAngelo argued in her recent book “White Fragility,” noting how difficult and sensitive it is for white people to talk about racism. The term white fragility itself is used to describe the disbelieving defensiveness and sensitivity that whites in North America reveal when their ideas about race and racism are contested. There are two sides to white fragility, which are “discomfort and anxiety” on one side, and the other is “superiority and entitlement.” White fragility is indeed
born of superiority and entitlement. According to DiAngelo, white people are the beneficiaries of separation and inequality arising from racial differences in America.

In accordance with this, Hill Fletcher makes the argument that “the stories of Christian tradition were mobilized for the self-love of White Supremacy and the destruction of non-white, non-Christian others.” To her, America is a White Christian Nation and was built on the conviction that it was God’s special duty for the white people to live there and curse every other race. She argues that “if Christians desire a world of racial justice and religious integrity, understanding the sin of supremacy and theology’s role within it is our only way forward.”

Christian supremacy and white supremacy share a close relationship and this has affected the present context of America.

In this project, education aims for conscientization and liberation is an essential tool. There is a need to undo and dismantle the whiteness and the Christianess in education. What I mean here is that we must employ interreligious education. Unfortunately, as is argued by Crist, interreligious engagement in America is characterized by Christianity, including its values and norms. It draws from a Christian perspective, and it produces a surface-level of engagement. In this regard, dialogue emphasizes finding the common ground, and therefore interreligious engagement is not effective enough to dismantle racism, discrimination, and oppression.

Therefore, in the American context, where the colonized interreligious education takes place, there is a need for decolonizing interreligious education. There are at least four rationales for it that I propose. First, decolonizing interreligious education is needed because the category of religion itself should be contested. What I refer here is the Protestant Christianity. Masuzawa asserts that the creation of religion as a category is built upon understandings of Christianity (Protestantism) as a religion. In this regard, the categories of religion have been determined by Euro-Christianity. For Crist, who argued for decolonizing multiple religious belonging, this arises from deterritorialization and the “world religions” approach which distorts religion into the shape of Protestant Christianity. Additionally, indigenous traditions are often excluded from religion categorically. As the concept of multiple religious belonging draws from colonial contexts and Protestant Christian paradigms, it ignores the displaced people and their identities. This makes the effort of religious pluralism finding the common ground based in Christianity (and Islam) doubtful. In “The Politics on Interreligious Education,” Najeeba Syeed Miller claims, “religion as the sole epistemic commitment for the basis of pluralism ignores the fractal genealogical patterns of lived religion.” She contends for many other sources in the interreligious course as we live in an age of plurality of pluralisms. In decolonizing interreligious education, there is no single religion that will dominate the entire conversation and that will be the basis of pluralism.

Second, decolonizing interreligious education helps us to rethink the notion of the common ground in the American context. In this regard, this education should speak to its multicultural context and pay serious attention to differences, both religious and cultural.

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24 Hill Fletcher, the sin, 2.
25 Hill Fletcher, the sin, 2.
26 Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 315.
Everyone must have a voice (voices) and be equal to others. Differences are something to celebrate, not something to be ignored. There are many different ways to deal with pluralism other than finding a common ground between the Abrahamic religions, primarily using the languages and narratives of the Protestant Christianity.

Third, decolonized interreligious education addresses the native or Indigenous cultures that are rich but were degraded by the occupation of Europeans in America. Syeed-Miller stresses the importance of acknowledging Indigenous traditions. She found out that there is a lack of discussion of many Indigenous traditions. By drawing from Linda Tuhhiwai-Smith’s work, she states that “it addresses the processes by which the academy has relentlessly marginalized the bodies, knowledges, and voices of indigenous communities.” For Syeed-Miller, it would be a pity to see interreligious education repeat these dynamics in its curriculum. I concur with her and therefore argue for decolonizing interreligious education that leads to an acknowledgment of Indigenous people, their cultures, traditions, and religions, or perhaps better, their spiritualities.

The fourth rationale that I propose here is that a decolonizing interreligious education would pay attention to the intersection of capitalism, globalism, patriarchy-hierarchy, politics, education, power, race, religion, and multi-religious narratives in the American context. This intersection will create a brave new third space. By decolonizing interreligious education in the American context, hybridity will be celebrated in the third space of engagement. Homi K. Bhabha coined the term “hybridity” as the third space of enunciation that is created in order to explain the positionality of the colonized individual. Here, culture has no fixity and even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized, and read anew. Hybridity itself relates to the position of in-betweenness wherein it two cultures, or more, are intertwined with one another and are characterized by the ability to negotiate differences. The third space itself is the place where this negotiation takes place, where identity is constructed and reconstructed, where life in all its ambiguity is played out. Furthermore, decolonized interreligious education touches upon not only the linguistic aspect but also the extra-linguistic aspect of interreligious engagement. In so doing, it challenges white or the Euro-Christian normativity regarding the notion of dialogue that is elitist. This means that there are many other creative forms of interreligious engagement in addition to dialogue, that can be done in an educational setting.

D. Toward Decolonizing Interreligious Education

Kujawa-Holbrook drawing on Peggy McIntosh’s “Christian privilege,” describes that the privilege of the Christians in the United States relates to things that occur in everyday settings, such as listening to Christian music on the radio, watching a Christmas or Easter program on television, and so on. Yet, it is also more than that. The Christian privilege that exists alongside and supports white privilege includes many other things from personal to the national level, from private to public space, from family to the society, from school rules to a nation’s official motto, and more. This privilege causes ignorance, a high level of cultural superiority, a low level of religious literacy, and a secure comfort zone. The Christians, as a majority, are too much at ease and forget to learn, understand, and respect other religions. There is no true cultural humility in

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30 Syeed-Miller, “The Politics.”
31 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 37-38.
32 Bhabha, The Location, 39.
33 Kujawa-Holbrook, God Beyond, xxvii.
interaction with different others. That is why religious literacy, as claimed by Kujawa-Holbrook, is an aspect that needs to be worked on for interreligious learning. To this, I will add that cultural and religious humility are important values for Americans.

It is through decolonizing interreligious education that Christian supremacy, white privilege, and dominant narratives will be challenged at the intersection of education, politics, race, power, pluralism, and multi-religious narratives in a brave new third-space. In this regard, interreligious education does not start from the superiority of Christianity or other Abrahamic religions. It does not start from the superiority of the white race over other races or ethnicities. It does not start from the superiority of white people over the immigrants; realizing that the white at some point in the history of the great America were also immigrants who colonized the Native peoples. Interreligious education must acknowledge the history of colonialism, the shortcomings of the capitalist system, and the reality of discrimination and oppression experienced by all Americans.

For Crist, educational programs in a decolonizing interfaith/interreligious project, need to acknowledge and confront the varieties of multiple religious belonging that exist in order to nurture the spirituality of those with multiple belongings and to refrain from preserving the trauma of Christian supremacy. This means that in order to decolonize interreligious education, the general/universal paradigms of religion must be contested, which one of the ways to do this is by using other sources on spirituality, not only those from Protestant Christianity. Peter C. Phan, who also discusses multiple religious belonging as something urgent and desirable for the present plural context, suggests that theological reflections on religious pluralism should use sources from spirituality traditions. This includes multi-faith worship and prayer where sacred scriptures will be used together with prayer and rituals from other religious traditions. In decolonizing interreligious education, the narratives, languages or categories that are used should acknowledge whose voice is missing and left out, especially those from the lived religions other than Christianity.

Thus, in a third-space of interaction in an interreligious setting, where everyone is equal, the concepts of peace, reconciliation, love, and other universal or general terms will be unpacked. Syeed Miller argues that “it is imperative that we do not allow this “universal” lexicon to prevail.” She believes that there are historical, cultural, communal, and individual meanings of terms that are often proposed as conventional values or wisdom for all in interreligious learning, which should not be. By decolonizing interreligious education, important questions and concerns regarding who determines the meaning of concepts/terms, whose narratives are used, and whose voices are left behind will be always taken into consideration in a curriculum design. Thus, the educator or instructor also need to think about how hidden sources of knowledge and subjugated knowledge can be surfaced and acknowledged. How it would be ethically and creatively taught in interreligious education. This means the educator in interreligious education need to always consider other sources of learning and use them imaginatively and fairly, such as when engaging inter-spirituality. In relation to this, Syeed Miller claims that as we live in an age of a plurality of pluralisms and it is time to consider about the study of inter-spiritualities in addition to Diana L. Eck, Paul Knitter, Judith Berling, and so on. I agree with her. Decolonizing interreligious education is about acknowledging and using sources, as well as methods, other than the

34 Crist, “Decolonizing.”
dominant ones. Borrowing Tuhiwai Smith’s concept, it is about “decolonizing methodologies” that are used not only in research but also in teaching.

Moreover, it is about packing and unpacking, learning and unlearning. By decolonizing interreligious education, underlying power structures, languages, narratives, and assumptions are challenged. This third space in interreligious education is a brave space where hybridity and inter-subjectivity are celebrated; where power relations and dynamics are acknowledged. It is a site of complex struggle and of meaning-making that allows both educator and student to reimagine and re-conceptualize their identities as they deal with white normativity in all its forms. It is a space where everyone celebrates differences, where ‘uncommon ground’ can be used to initiate conversation in its many forms, not only in the linguistic form of dialogue.

Finally, what I present here is a preliminary work in discussing about decolonizing interreligious education. In an educational setting of interreligious engagement, there are many important questions still to address as part of decolonizing and resistance against the white normativity. Those questions include who will do the teaching, which qualifications for the educator will be needed, who is involved in the curriculum design, whose voices are left behind, where the teaching takes place, what creative means other than dialogue that can be used in teaching that promotes equality and liberation, what are the politics and structures of spiritual formation in our present hybrid contexts, how do we deal with white fragility, how do we deal with non-white discrimination, how do we deal with multiracial identities, and much more. Everyone who is involved in decolonizing interreligious education must think thoroughly about this and should be well prepared to address this prior to presenting a curriculum, either inside or outside of a classroom setting. The curriculum here, whether produced by theological schools or faith communities, must take seriously plurality in many forms. As plurality is inescapable everywhere, not only in America, and white normativity has influenced other parts of the world and has crossed the boundary of the west to the east, the efforts to decolonize interreligious education and contribute to equality and liberation, may be an important consideration for other contexts.

E. Selected Bibliography


https://www.aarweb.org/node/1877