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What Might Meaningful Interfaith Education Look Like? Exploring Politics, Principles and Pedagogy

Abstract: Though interfaith education presents political challenges, it is a main vehicle for communities to address violence and discrimination based in bigotry and misunderstanding. This colloquy, coordinated by a Jewish and a Christian educator, explores possibilities and procedures. The coordinators pose a series of questions: Who should invest resources in interfaith education? To what ends? In public schools, religious schools, congregations? How do we engage with theologies? The leaders hope to spark discussion within REA and generate new practices.

Description: This conversation on interfaith education is being hosted by a Jewish educator and a Christian educator, both of whom have participated in and written about extending the conversation about interfaith education and have experienced the gifts and challenges which arise. In addition to sharing our own experiences, we hope to draw from those present about hopes, concerns, experiences and pedagogical approaches. We welcome personal stories from participants about their interfaith education experiences, hoping to derive pedagogic suggestions that might offer effective practices. We hope to spark discussion within REA and generate new practices. Furthermore, we celebrate the interfaith education commitments at the heart of REA, embodied in the journal. We therefore want to give witness to and provide encouragement for more specific and ongoing strategies of interfaith educational work at the annual meetings of REA and in consultations it could sponsor.

Though interfaith education presents a minefield of political challenges, we believe it is the main vehicle for individuals and communities to address violence and discrimination based in religious bigotry, ignorance, and misunderstanding of other faiths. Without simply getting enmeshed in politics (with Friere, we acknowledge that all education is political) we will examine some of the issues that can act as stumbling blocks to interfaith education and understanding. Some stumbling blocks may be political; some may result from an uncritical ethnocentricity that encourages the continuation of cultural and theological bias (Byrne, 2011); and some may be rooted in particular expressions of faith traditions.

Interfaith education and intercultural education are often intertwined (Halsall & Roebben, 2006). In our work, we can learn much from the rather well-developed field of intercultural and multicultural education. For example, moving far beyond the “foods and festivals” approach, Banks (2009) points to the results of comprehensive multicultural education as content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure.

We hope all of these could result from religious or public processes of interfaith education.

Research in the UK about religious education in schools has suggested two goals for interfaith education: “to learn about” religion and religions, and “to learn from” religion so people can critically reflect on their own experiences and their interactions with others. In a world where religions sometimes conflict, these goals are seen as ways of building a common respect for the other in order to live together (*Religious Education: Non-Statutory National Framework*, 36 ff). But, even more, we also want to consider, even in cultures that practice the separation of church and state, how to add the spiritual dimension of this work and learning about and from others’ views of God and our understandings of religious vocation – to what is God calling us?

Interfaith education in schools and religious institutions faces significant challenges resulting from both public commitments and religious theologies. Some of the questions which must be asked include the following: Can the public schools invest resources in interfaith education? To what hoped-for ends? What would be permitted and what forbidden in a public school context? (Our various cultures have such different ways of dealing with religion in public life – from mandated to voluntary to almost excluded.) Would the main goals be acquiring knowledge of other religions and inculcating habits of openness, asking and listening, in order to create a just society? Should interfaith education have spiritual goals as well? If so, is it better to leave interfaith education to religious schools, where issues of spirituality and faith can be openly discussed? Or does it belong outside the schools altogether, in community settings? If so, who would undertake it? For what ages is this an appropriate field of study? How can we include children in order to plant the seeds of empathy and curiosity, to teach the habits of reaching out for dialogue, and building community?

Aims and goals, frameworks, curriculum, pedagogy, and responsibility are all issues we can discuss. From an initial exploration of the commitments colloquium participants come prepared to discuss, we plan to consider deeply the hoped-for reasons and goals of interfaith education and alternative places and procedures for its encouragement, and to envision pedagogical practices. Finally, we hope to develop some concrete suggestions to REA, beyond the work of the journal, about ways to engage and sponsor further conversations.

We hope in this colloquy to engage in a conversation that is both critical and spiritual. Critical, in order to reflect on the blinders imposed by ethnocentricity, and spiritual, because if such a conversation does not lead us closer to God, then what is it for? From our own experience as well as a review of the literature, we offer a beginning typology of reasons for interfaith education and different kinds of learning that interfaith education can engender. The typology with which we are presently working includes the following:

- Learning for purposes of contrast -- Learning about another religious tradition for apologetic purposes or for ability to fairly contrast

- Learning about -- Learning about another religious tradition for purposes of understanding and interacting. Simply realizing that we live in a shared world together. Respect begins here, but is often very shallow.
- Learning in spite of -- Making a concerted effort to learn about, understand and communicate with those of other faiths with whom we are in particular disagreement or conflict.
- Learning from -- Learning from another tradition about the ways all of us as religious people share procedures, understandings, and even histories. This mode of learning enhances my own learning of my religious tradition, e.g. that both Judaism and monophysite Christianity were present in the area where Muhammed received his revelation -- the connections shared. This is where respect really begins to grow.
- Learning with -- Learning about another's tradition and commitments so we can work in partnership on common projects for the common good, e.g. the commitment to "the least of these" in our three Abrahamic faiths -- widow, pilgrim, stranger. Such a conviction meant Jews and Christians worked together for racial justice in the U.S. and that Hindus, traditional religionists, Jews, and Christians worked to challenge apartheid in South Africa. The very process of working together towards a common goal becomes "learning with".
- Learning to deepen my own faith or learning from the "stranger," from otherness - - learning from another tradition with the purpose of deepening my own connection to God, to religious identity, to faithfulness. This approach deepens my own faith perspective and also opens it to the depth of God's interaction with the world. Sara Lee tells a wonderful story in her book with Mary Boys. Hearing Mary talk about veneration of Jesus caused her to realize that it was "similar" to veneration of the Torah. For the both each had a source of light and honor.
- Learning for spiritual growth -- moving from personal spiritual growth to seeking and recognizing shared connection and insights about creation, community, and future.

Pre-Colloquy Thinking Activities:

1. What comments do you have about, or what additions, deletions or changes do you think could be made, to the typology?
2. Who should invest resources in interfaith education? To what ends? In public schools, religious schools, congregations? How do we engage with theologies?
3. What in your experience is shared between the complementary fields of intercultural education and interfaith education? What is unique to interfaith education, and why?
4. What meetings, epiphanies, dilemmas, flashes of insight or hard-won knowledge have occurred in your life related to interfaith understanding? Please bring your story.
5. How might personal experience like your own be translated into an educational framework? Or does education facilitate and enable, but not replace personal experience?

6. What practical pedagogical approaches have worked for you in interfaith education?
7. Some Roman Catholic and Muslim scholars are using a typology of inter-religious communication termed "dialogue of life." Do you think this could be useful in educational frameworks, and if so, how?

Dialogue of Life

a) The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

b) The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

c) The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.

d) The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute

1984 document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, in http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

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