

INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Dr. Trina Janiec Jones and Rev. Dr. Ron Robinson, Wofford College (Spartanburg, SC)
joneskj@wofford.edu and robinsonrr@wofford.edu

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In 2014, Dr. Trina Janiec Jones participated in a Teaching Interfaith Understanding faculty development seminar, run in partnership between the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith Youth Core, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. For information on future seminars, and to access more resources created by seminar alumni, visit <https://www.ifyc.org/content/ifyc-cic-resources>.

Alongside creating this course, Dr. Jones and the Rev. Dr. Ron Robinson were also able to offer the travel portion through the generous funding of the [Bringing Theory to Practice \(BTtoP\) Project](#). The goals of BTtoP and this particular course on Interfaith Engagement and Religious Pluralism converged around the ways in which human flourishing is both predicated (at least in part) upon and shapes engagement with difference and personal identity development. As such, the course began with two assumptions: (1) that liberal learning is, in large part, predicated on the goal of facilitating civically-engaged learning, and (2) that civic engagement, in turn, is predicated largely on helping students learn how to engage meaningfully and productively with difference.

Course Description

This course explores the civic, theological, and philosophical challenges and opportunities involved with religious pluralism. What does it mean for groups with different religious commitments to share the same civic space? What might it mean to move beyond religious tolerance toward civic engagement among people of many faiths and those of no faith?

We will also consider more overarching questions related to the field of religious studies. For example:

- ▶ What does it mean to study “religion”?
- ▶ What does it mean to study one particular religious tradition?

¹ In consultation with the author, this syllabus has been edited for length, removing details particular to the author’s context such as office hours and location, absence policies, honor codes, and other instructor-specific (or institution-specific) details.

- ▶ What is the difference between studying religion (or pluralism) in an academic context, as opposed to a faith-based context, as opposed to the context of the civic sphere?
- ▶ What is the difference between “religious studies” and “theology”? Does it matter?
- ▶ Is human flourishing affected by interreligious and/or interfaith engagement?

Course Learning Goals

This course begins with two assumptions: (1) that liberal learning is, in large part, predicated on the goal of facilitating civically-engaged learning, and (2) that civic engagement, in turn, is predicated largely on helping students learn how to engage meaningfully and productively with difference. The learning objectives for this course involve students’ acquiring a more nuanced understanding of the following:

- ▶ What we mean when we speak of “diversity” and “(religious) pluralism”;
- ▶ What we mean when we talk about “religiousness,” “religion,” and “religious identity.” What assumptions underpin our use of these words?
- ▶ The philosophical challenges entailed in theologies of religious pluralism, as well as the difference between a theology of religious pluralism and comparative theology;
- ▶ A history of religious pluralism in the United States, focusing on specific challenges and areas of positive engagement;
- ▶ Various notions of religious belonging, including “none,” “spiritual but not religious,” and other hybridities; and
- ▶ More general questions related to the field of religious studies (the history of the academic field, which has changed and grown in response to religious pluralism) and its lexicon (for example, what have various scholars meant when they have used the typology of “exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism”?).

Required Texts and Course Materials

- ▶ Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*
- ▶ Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares* (excerpts)
- ▶ Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious*
- ▶ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*
- ▶ Chris Stedman, *Faithiest: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*

Course Assignments

You will be asked to complete one outside project (this project includes a presentation and final paper); you will also have two in-class tests, a reflection paper, a few group activities, and writing assignments on Moodle. And, finally, we will have an opportunity to travel to Washington D.C. to explore some of the pathways toward interfaith engagement that are available at this point in our nation’s history.

Assessment of Student Learning

- ▶ Tests: 30% (15% each)
- ▶ Reflection Paper: 7.5%
- ▶ Quizzes: 7.5%
- ▶ Group Projects/Discussion Leading/Informal Writing: 5%
- ▶ Project: 50%
 - ▶ Imagined topics assignment - 5%
 - ▶ Annotated bibliography - 10%
 - ▶ Topic analysis - 10%
 - ▶ Presentation - 10%
 - ▶ Final paper - 15% - **See Appendices I and II for assignment details**

COURSE SCHEDULE

The Civic Grounds for Religious Pluralism

WEEK 1

Tuesday

- ▶ Introduction – What is “religious pluralism”? What is “the flourishing scale”? What is [The Pluralism and Worldview Engagement Rubric](#)?
- ▶ A few words on the [UN’s Interfaith Harmony Week](#)

Thursday

- ▶ Syllabus Quiz; Pew data and PRRI (con’t)
- ▶ Cassie Meyer, “Engaging Interfaith Studies Across the Curriculum: From Niche to Norm”
- ▶ Allie Grasgreen, “[Beyond Tolerance](#)” (aka, “College Officials Discuss Religious Pluralism at AACU Meeting”)
- ▶ Allie Grasgreen, “Atheist, Secular Students Becoming Established on Religious Campuses”

WEEK 2

Tuesday

- ▶ Eboo Patel, excerpt from *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, in the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (excerpts)
- ▶ Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, Part I

Thursday

- ▶ *Sacred Ground*, Part II

WEEK 3

Tuesday

- ▶ *Sacred Ground*, Part III

Thursday

- ▶ An example of interfaith engagement: “Ravel/Unravel” introduction and explanation

WEEK 4

Tuesday

- ▶ “Ravel/Unravel” – con’t.

Thursday

- ▶ Eck – *Encountering God*, chs. 7 & 8

WEEK 5

Tuesday

- ▶ Work with examples from Eck’s Pluralism Project in class
- ▶ Imagine Topics Assignment due

Thursday: Test

WEEK 6

Tuesday

- ▶ Excerpt from *The Cambridge Guide to American Islam*
- ▶ Edward Curtis, “The Study of American Muslims: A History”

Thursday

- ▶ Trip to Washington DC – ***See Appendix III for trip itinerary***

The Theological and Philosophical Challenges of Religious Pluralism

WEEK 7

Tuesday

- ▶ Debrief from DC trip

Thursday

- ▶ William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*
- ▶ “Suffering, Justice, and the Politics of Becoming”
- ▶ “An Ethos of Engagement”

WEEK 8

Tuesday

- ▶ Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Part I)

Thursday

- ▶ Annotated Bibliography Due
- ▶ Clooney, Part II

WEEK 9

Tuesday

- ▶ Clooney, Part III

Thursday

- ▶ Scriptural Reasoning (introduction)

WEEK 10

Tuesday and Thursday: Spring Break

WEEK 11

Tuesday

- ▶ Scriptural Reasoning

Thursday

- ▶ Scriptural Reasoning
- ▶ Topic Analysis Due

WEEK 12

Tuesday

- ▶ Linda Mercadante, *Belief Beyond Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious*

Thursday

- ▶ Mercadante (con't)

WEEK 13

Tuesday

- ▶ Mercadante (con't)

Thursday

- ▶ Christ Stedman, *Faithiest: How and Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*

WEEK 14

Tuesday

- ▶ Stedman (con't)

Thursday

- ▶ Presentations

WEEK 15

Tuesday

- ▶ Presentations (con't)

Thursday

- ▶ Exam

APPENDIX I

REL 260: Interfaith Engagement and Religious Pluralism

Take-Home Test: Thinking Through a Case Study by Engaging Texts

Directions

Please read the case study below. Once you have read it, please answer the following question. Based on your readings of *Sacred Ground*, the excerpt of *Acts of Faith*, and the excerpts from *Encountering God*, what advice do you think Eboo Patel and Diana Eck would give to Steve Wareham? Why? And, finally, what do you think he should do, and why?

As mentioned in class, please don't worry about whether or not you think your professors will agree with your opinion regarding what Wareham should do. That isn't the point of this essay. Rather, we're trying to see

- ▶ How you understood the reading,
- ▶ How clearly you can discuss it in writing,
- ▶ How clearly you can engage and evaluate this writing, and
- ▶ How well you are able to apply what you take the reading to be saying to a specific practical example.

This essay should be between 3 and 6 pages.

Case Study: Driven by Faith or Customer Service? Muslim Taxi Drivers at the MSP Airport²

When Steve Wareham heard that there had been another formal complaint about taxi service at the Minneapolis St. Paul International Airport (MSP), it came as no surprise. As Airport Director, Wareham had been working with the taxi advisory council for years to improve customer service. Together, they enhanced the taxicab ordinance with input from drivers, owners, and taxi companies. Wareham was proud of the progress made on key service issues through this collaborative process. But not every problem had been solved: one issue, which threatened to derail the larger process, had been tabled.

Beginning in 2002, Airport Staff became aware that some passengers who were carrying alcohol—often visible in the plastic bags from duty-free shops—had been refused taxi service. The drivers, many of whom were Muslims from Somalia, explained that their faith did not permit them to consume or transport alcohol. Wareham and his colleagues at the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC), the regional governing body for airports, found the issue troubling. Such service refusals were prohibited by the taxicab ordinance: drivers who refused a fare for any reason were sent to the end of the line, and had to wait two to four hours for another fare. Losing fares represented a significant economic and practical hardship; for the drivers, this was an issue of religious accommodation.

Yet, given the practical concerns that arose curbside, and the number of passenger complaints, refusals had also emerged as a serious customer service issue. Passengers being moved from one taxi to another disrupted the flow of traffic, and posed a safety concern. Those who were refused service were confused and frustrated, and often insulted: on one occasion, a traveler threw a bottle of wine to the pavement in anger.

² This case study comes from the Pluralism Project at Harvard University and their Case Study Initiative: <http://pluralism.org/casestudy/>.

Since Wareham became Airport Director in 2004, he had worked closely with Landside, the department that handles parking and commercial vehicles, to resolve the issue. Early on, he sought input from Somali community representatives and Muslim leaders. For a time, the taxi starter—a dispatcher employed by the MAC—would provide bags to travelers in order to cover the wine or other visible alcohol. It was a “don’t see, don’t look” policy. This worked for a while, but soon the drivers began refusing service to those carrying the distinctive bags. One cab company, which had all Muslim drivers suggested that the starter refer passengers with alcohol to a cab from another company. After a few days, the MAC was asked to discontinue the practice: the loss of business proved difficult for the drivers and owners alike.

On March 29, 2006, Wareham received a message from Vicki Tigwell, the Chair of the MAC. She forwarded the most recent customer complaint: ‘My wife and I needed a cab from MSP to Apple Valley. The starter directed us to a cab. After loading most of our luggage, he (the driver), noticed I was carrying duty-free liquor, and refused to transport us. The next three cabs also refused. The starter came out and finally located a driver who would take us. We were very unhappy about this abysmal treatment by four cab drivers. ... I request you take action against the company and the driver, and draft a policy to prevent this behavior in the future.’³

Tigwell’s message ended with a directive for Wareham: “I expect you to solve this.”⁴

Test evaluation

Try to be as specific as you can in your answers. Also, remember that you should always allow yourself time to give your work a final read-through before turning it in. (As you read, ask yourself: is my answer clear and coherent? Would somebody who doesn’t live in my head with me know what I’m talking about? Does the answer clearly communicate a main point, or thesis, around which the rest of the essay is built?)

You will be graded in large part on *coherence* and *clarity*. The main things I’m looking for are

- ▶ The point that you’re making, and
- ▶ A clear explanation of your point. You also need to be specific in engaging Patel and Eck in your answer, rather than talking about them in vague terms. Use the texts.

³ Steve Wareham, “Muslim Taxi Driver Cultural Clash at the Minneapolis St. Paul International Airport (MSP): Does Accepting a Customer with Alcohol in their Possession Violate a Prohibition of the Koran?” (Master’s Thesis, Bethel University, 2007), p. 6.

⁴ Steve Wareham, interview by Ellie Pierce, Bloomington, MN, February 28 & 29, 2008.

APPENDIX II

REL 260: Interfaith Engagement and Religious Pluralism

Final Reflection and Assessment

Format

Please write this just like you would write any other academic paper. Your tone, though, can be a bit less formal. Your writing will be assessed on the basis of

- ▶ Whether you have a point, or thesis, around which the rest of the writing revolves,
- ▶ Whether you explain what you mean clearly and support your points,
- ▶ Whether you say seems to sort of “skim the surface” and be a piece of writing done just to “get it out of the way.”

In order for us to think through the course and its overarching themes reflectively, it will be helpful to think back through

- ▶ The goals of the course as stated on the syllabus,
- ▶ [The Flourishing Scale](#), and
- ▶ [The Pluralism and Worldview Engagement Rubric](#).

Writing

Please write at least three pages (more if you wish) on any of the following questions. You can also write your own question, as long as you get it approved by Dr. Jones or Dr. Robinson 24 hours in advance of the time the writing is due.

- ▶ Do you think that human flourishing is affected by interreligious and/or interfaith engagement? Why? Please explain what you mean.
- ▶ What do you think “human flourishing” actually means? How can colleges foster flourishing, at least in terms of increasing the probability of its occurring—of creating the spaces to let this happen?
- ▶ Take a look at the Pluralism and Worldview Engagement Rubric. Where would you place yourself on it? Has your placement changed any since taking this course?

APPENDIX III

REL 260: Interfaith Engagement and Religious Pluralism

Trip to Washington DC

THURSDAY

6:00am Depart Wofford College

3:00pm Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs

Georgetown University
3307 M Street Northwest #200
Washington, DC 20007

We will be meeting [Dr. Michael Kessler](#), director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University

5:15pm Depart Georgetown University

FRIDAY

9:30am Depart Hotel

10:00am U.S. Department of State

2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

We will be meeting [Dr. Shaun Casey](#), Special Representative for Religion & Global Affairs

11:45am Depart U.S. Department of State

12:00pm Islamic Society of North America

United Methodist Building
100 Maryland Ave NE
Washington, DC 20002

We will be meeting [Dr. Sayyid Syeed](#), National Director for the Office for Interfaith & Community Alliances for the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)

1:30pm Public Religion Research Institute

2027 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Floor 3
Washington, DC 20036

We will be meeting [Dr. Robert Jones](#), the CEO of Public Religion Research Institute

3:45pm Leave PRRI for Hotel

SATURDAY

10:40am Depart Hotel

10:45am National Cathedral

3101 Wisconsin Ave NW
Washington, DC 20016
(202) 537-6200

We will be meeting with [Rev. Gina Gilland Campbell](#), Canon Precentor of Washington National Cathedral

2:15pm Depart Cathedral for Wofford