

Conference Session 1.1: Academic – Research and Teaching

CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL UNION

Chicago, IL (USA)

Interreligious Education and Programming: Best Practices

Scott C. Alexander, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Islamic Studies

Director, Catholic-Muslim Studies

1. Historical Background

The interfaith emphasis at Catholic Theological Union has to do with its institutional *raison d'être*. CTU was founded in 1968 in the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council as a graduate school of theology and ministry dedicated to the principles of the Council. Among the many emphases of Vatican II—which was convened for the purposes of clarifying the mission of the Church in the modern world—was that the Church should engage in dialogue with men and women of other faiths for the purposes of witnessing to Christ in modalities that affirmed the dignity of other religious people and “ways,” as well as for the sake of greater and lasting peace and justice in the human family (see *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated on October 28, 1965).

2. Summary of Interreligious Programming

Given the Council’s extremely important condemnation of anti-Semitism (*Nostra Aetate*, sec. 4), CTU welcomed Rabbi Dr. Hayim Goren Perelmutter as a charter member of its faculty. This marked one important step in the founding of what is now CTU’s internationally renowned Catholic-Jewish Studies Program directed by Prof. Fr. John Pawlikowski, OSM, social ethicist, past-president of the International Council of Christians and Jews, and one of the world’s leading scholars of Christian (especially Catholic)-Jewish relations. With time CTU has developed the program even further through the establishment of the Crown-Ryan Chair in Jewish Studies to be held by a Jewish scholar and currently held by Prof. Rabbi David Fox Sandmel, one of the architects of *Dabru Emet* and an internationally recognized expert in Jewish-Christian relations. This has all taken place under the auspices of CTU’s Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Center for Theology and Ministry established in 1997 to educate leaders in the cardinal’s signature ministries, one of which was interreligious dialogue.

In October of 2000—in response to the Second Vatican Council’s mandate for Catholic-Muslim dialogue (*Nostra Aetate*, sec. 3), and with an almost prescient understanding of the importance of Catholic-Muslim dialogue to sustainable global peace and justice—CTU resolved to create a Catholic-Muslim Studies Program as a sister program to its senior Catholic-Jewish counterpart. This program was inaugurated under the leadership of its founding director, Prof. Scott C. Alexander who had previously been an assistant professor of Islamic Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. Since its founding, the Catholic-Muslim Studies Program has followed the example of its elder sister by offering a number of courses in Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian relations, usually team-taught by Muslim and Christian faculty working closely together and modeling strong and respectful Muslim-Christian relations for the students. Of late, both Catholic-Jewish and Catholic-Muslim Studies at CTU have been the bi-lateral foundations of a very successful and ongoing trilateral (Jewish-Christian-Muslim) annual dialogue series entitled “In Good Faith,” and a new MA concentration in interreligious dialogue

which has attracted two cohorts of superb students. While we have had Muslim students and one Jewish student, one of our greatest challenges will be continuing to attract Jewish and Muslim students into the program so that all the concentrators and their colleagues have the richest possible experience of interreligious learning.

The reason why CTU's focus is on the dialogue with Jews and Muslims is because the institution has been blessed with the specific resources to establish programs in these areas that have the highest possible credentials and that are as intellectually rigorous as they are spiritually challenging and enriching. As resources allow, CTU would very much like to expand its interreligious programming in the areas of Hindu-, Buddhist-, and Lakota-Christian dialogue. In August 2004, Prof. Edmund Chia, who had served eight years as Executive Secretary of Interreligious Dialogue for the Catholic Church in Asia, joined the faculty, significantly enhancing the interreligious programming at CTU. Prof. Chia has worked building relationships with a number of adjuncts and visiting professors—especially those from South and East Asia—to offer courses on interreligious concerns particular to South and East Asian contexts. Working closely with the faculty with administrative positions directly responsible for interreligious programming, is a group of CTU faculty with interreligious concerns central to their teaching and research. Most notable in this regard are: Prof. Michel Andraos who specializes in Christian theologies of religious pluralism, interreligious peacemaking, and Christian-Muslim relations, especially among Arab peoples; Prof. Claude Marie Barbour who specializes in Lakota-Christian dialogue within the broader context of her focus on intercultural healing and reconciliation; Prof. Robert Schreiter, C.Pp.S. who focuses on interreligious dialogue in his work on the social dimensions of reconciliation and forgiveness; and Profs. Steven Bevans, S.V.D. and Roger Schroeder, S.V.D. who both focus on interreligious concerns in their work on “prophetic dialogue” and contextual theologies.

3. Best Practices

3.1 Forging Community Partnerships toward an Ethic of Mutuality

Both the Catholic-Jewish and Catholic-Muslim Studies Programs have standing committees on the National Advisory Board of the Bernardin Center for Theology and Ministry. These two committees are comprised of prominent local and national academic, business, and religious leaders with considerable experience in, and/or considerable dedication to, interreligious dialogue. In addition to the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faculty teaching in the respective programs, more than half of the membership of each of these two committees are Jews and Muslims, respectively. Of these, many are leaders of important Jewish and Muslim local and national organizations such as the Jewish United Fund, the American Jewish Committee, the Chicago Board of Rabbis, the Islamic Society of North America, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago. This reflects CTU's deeply held principle that authentic dialogue must strive for *mutuality* every step of the way, such that there is no element of the journey that is not agreed upon by all the partners in the journey. Toward this end, CTU has endowed its Crown-Ryan Chair in Jewish Studies as a chair for a Jewish scholar at a Catholic institution, funded by donors from both the Catholic and Jewish communities. CTU hopes to create a similar chair for a Muslim scholar in the near future.

3.2 Authentic Self-Representation and Informed/Empathic Understanding

Two closely related and guiding principles of CTU's interreligious pedagogy have been that of *authentic self-representation* and *informed/empathic understanding*. The faculty of the Catholic-Jewish and Catholic-Muslim Studies Programs are each respectively comprised of both Christian faculty with expertise in Judaism and Islam, as well as Jewish and Muslim faculty with expertise in Christianity. In this way students learn the absolute primacy of authentic-self-representation in interreligious studies and dialogue, as well as the critical importance of developing an informed and ideally empathic understanding of religious traditions other than one's own.

3.3 Interreligious Team Teaching and Relationship Modeling

Interreligious team teaching is an important pedagogical practice through which the principles of authentic self-representation and informed/empathic understanding are ideally integrated. Not only does this practice help ensure mutuality in syllabus construction, class instruction, and course leadership, but it also can be a vehicle for modeling interreligious relationships. A majority of CTU's courses in interreligious studies are team-taught by faculty who, in many cases, have longstanding professional and personal relationships of a very high quality. In courses like "Abraham's Children" (taught by a team of three colleagues—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) and "The History of Muslim-Christian Relations" (taught by both a Muslim and a Christian faculty member), for example, students frequently note in their evaluations that one of the most enriching aspects of the course were the ways in which the faculty *modeled interreligious relationships* rooted in a high degree of shared erudition, mutual respect, and obvious friendship.

3.4 Jewish and Muslim Students at a Catholic Institution

It has been our experience that the presence of courageous and path-breaking Jewish and Muslim students within CTU's student body as interreligious teachers, guides, and companions is as important as the presence of our Jewish and Muslim faculty. It is these students who—in classes not directly related to dialogue, in the refectory, in study groups, in the dormitories, and in a wide variety of student social activities—add an invaluable perspective which challenges their Christian colleagues and faculty to grow in ways not previously imagined. CTU has scholarship funds available and is working diligently to enhance these funds that allow us to attract Jewish and Muslim students who value dialogue and who wish to partner with us in seeing to it that the voices of their community play a vital role in the education of Christian theologians and ministers.

3.5 Bilateral Relationships in a Trilateral Context

An important best practice of CTU's interreligious dialogue programming has been the cultivation of bilateral interreligious relationships of understanding and trust within an explicitly trilateral (i.e., Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) interreligious context. This means that, although each of the two bilateral programs (i.e., Catholic-Jewish and Catholic-Muslim) has its own relative autonomy and integrity, nothing CTU does in its programming partnership with one set of interreligious partners can violate the trust it has developed with another. This necessitates frequent and open communication between the two bilateral programs. The great advantage of this approach is that it allows CTU to sponsor quality trilateral programming such as: its new M.A. (Theology) concentration in interreligious dialogue, whereby students must fulfill both bilateral and trilateral requirements (see attached concentration overview); and *In Good Faith*, its trilateral dialogue and relationship-building program for community leaders which is organized

by an interreligious steering committee of members of the Bernardin Center National Advisory Board and which elicits a commitment from its 60 to 70 participants to attend three meetings every year.

3.6 Awareness of, and Respect for, Intra-Religious Diversity and the Intra-Religious Dimensions of Interreligious Dialogue

In its relationships with various constituencies within the Roman Catholic Church, as well as with its ecumenical and interreligious partners, CTU strives to maintain sensitivity to issues of intra-religious diversity. Ecumenically, CTU maintains strong ties with our sister Hyde Park schools of theology and we encourage our students to take interreligious studies courses at these institutions. We recently have created a course flyer of all the Hyde Park interreligious course offerings for the next two academic years, trying carefully to avoid scheduling conflicts that have similar courses competing for students. Within the Catholic-Jewish dialogue, respect for intra-religious diversity entails maintaining strong ties with the Reform community, while reaching out to Conservative and Modern Orthodox constituencies as well. Within the Catholic-Muslim dialogue, this entails balancing outreach to various sectarian (i.e., Sunni and Shi`i), ethnic (i.e., Arab, South Asian, Eastern European, Turkish, and African American) and quasi-denominational groups (i.e., Salafis and Sufis).

3.7 Hospitality: Creating a 'Safe Space' for Dialogue and Dialogic Teaching and Learning

CTU strives to present itself to its dialogue partners as a 'safe space' for the often delicate and sometimes difficult process of encounter and mutual transformation. On a very basic level, this means developing an ethic of hospitality which entails practices such as: serving only kosher and halal food at interreligious events; respecting Jewish Sabbath observance in scheduling all interreligious events; respecting Muslim daily prayer times and providing a welcoming and properly appointed space for these prayers. On a deeper philosophical and theological level, this also entails an implicit prohibition against proselytism and intentional polemicism. Although bearing sincere witness to one's faith is a crucial element of any honest and meaningful interreligious dialogue, CTU recognizes both proselytism and polemics to be antithetical to the nature and purpose of dialogue. This is especially true where majority and minority dynamics are so clearly in play as they are in the case of Jews and Muslims participating in dialogue and dialogic teaching and learning in a North American Catholic institution.

3.8 Course Offerings and Other Curricular Events

The following are courses and other curricular events (such as conferences) which CTU has offered in recent years:

Islamic Spirituality and Mysticism; Introduction to Islam; History of Muslim-Christian Relations; Contemporary Islamic Renewal and Reform Movements; The Message & the Messenger—the Qur'an and the Life of Muhammad (s.); Holocaust and Genocide Studies; Jesus Through Jewish Eyes; Theological Issues in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue; Liturgy of the Synagogue; Abraham's Children; Inculturation and Dialogue; Comparative Theology and the History of Religions; Interreligious Dialogue Colloquium; Middle East Biblical Studies Travel Seminar; Christian Theologies of Religious Pluralism; Religion in Context; Christology and Culture; Interreligious Dialogue in Asia; Religions of East Asia; Religions of West Asia; The Pharisees, Judaism and the Church; Ways of Meditating, Ways of Praying; The Tao Te Ching;

Reading the Torah—Jewish Contexts; Hindu and Buddhist Perspectives on Other Religious Traditions; The Spirituality of Lakota-Christian Dialogue.

The following are other curricular events (especially public conferences, lectures, and dialogue opportunities:

Sisters—Women, Religion, and Leadership in Christianity and Islam; Rahma—Spiritual Companionship with Muslims in a Hospital Setting; For All Humanity—Catholic-Muslim Dialogue in Global Perspective; Hidden Treasures—Voices of Women in Judaism, Christianity & Islam (bi-annual); In Good Faith—Trilateral (i.e., Jewish, Christian, Muslim) Dialogue (3x/year); Seminar on Catholic/Jewish Relations for Latino/a Catholics in Ministry; Annual Shapiro Lectures (3x/year in Jewish-Christian studies); The Hayim Goren Perelmuter Conference (e.g., Healing the World, Working Together—Religion in Global Society, sponsored in conjunction with the International Conference of Christians and Jews).