

Higher Education and Interreligious Dialogue

Joseph L. Subbiondo¹

Abstract: This article highlights the current need for inclusion of courses on religion and spirituality, as well as interreligious dialogue in higher education through an examination of three interrelated dimensions: Interreligious dialogue, religious pluralism and religious literacy. Some initiatives in this direction at the California Institute of Integral Studies are discussed.

Key Words: Higher Education; interreligious dialogue; Religious Pluralism; Religious literacy; California Institute of Integral Studies.

In 1973, the California Institute of Asian Studies, as the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) was known then, applied for accreditation by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Led by the primary founders of CIIS, Haridas and Bina Chaudhuri, the Institute prepared a compelling institutional report in which they affirmed the quality of the academic programs as well as the operations of the Institute. In the report, the following courses were listed among the requirements of MA degree programs: 'Comparative Religion: East and West', 'Comparative Mysticism', 'Comparative Theology', 'Religion and Comparative Politics', and 'Varieties of Mystical and Psychedelic Experiences'. The following courses were listed among the electives: 'Meditation and Other Spiritual Disciplines', 'Religious Symbols', and 'Psychophysiology of Religious Experiences'. Certainly, a forward thinking curriculum for today, and a remarkably progressive one in 1973!

As you can see, interreligious study and dialogue has been a significant constituent of the CIIS educational experience since its founding. In keeping with this founding vision, which was and continues to be well ahead of its time, I will focus here on the now more-than-ever need for higher education in general, and CIIS in particular, to advance interreligious dialogue. To show the inextricable link between higher education and interreligious dialogue, I propose the following assertions:

- a) Interreligious dialogue requires religious pluralism;
- b) Religious pluralism requires religious literacy; and
- c) Religious literacy requires higher education.

¹ **Joseph L. Subbiondo**, president of CIIS since June 1999, has an accomplished background in both administration and academics. He brings a 30-year history of achievement in higher education, including appointments on several international academic committees; and he has been active on many accreditation teams for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Prior to coming to CIIS, he served as Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at St. Mary's College of California; Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of the Pacific; Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Santa Clara University; and as a professor of English and linguistics at four universities.

Jsubbiondo@ciis.edu



We know too well the consequences of living in a world that is in need of interreligious dialogue. Most, if not all, of the wars in our lifetimes have been or are being fought largely because of religious difference. For example, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Hindus and Muslims in India, Muslims and Jews in Israel and Palestine, and Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq and the list goes on. The United States is not immune to violence in the name of religion as the post 9/11 assaults, such as the murder of a Sikh in Mesa, Arizona will attest.

Religion as a justification for war is as old as religion itself. For as long as we have recorded history, people have interpreted their religious beliefs as mandates to plunge themselves and their societies into deadly conflicts. It is easy to understand why many people identify war with religion. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2005) points out in his book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, “Too often [religion] appears on the news, and lodges in the mind, as extremism, violence, and aggression” (p. 9).

Because religion has served as a battle cry, many reasonable people have argued that we should do away with it because it prevents peace and perpetuates oppression. For example, Richard Dawkins (2006) asserts this position in *The God Delusion*, as does Christopher Hitchens (2009) in his book, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. While Dawkins and Hitchens are correct in maintaining that religion has too often been associated with evil throughout history, I support Karen Armstrong’s response to Dawkins and Hitchens in *The Case for God* (Armstrong, 2009). She writes: “It is ... misleading to insist that all the problems of the modern world are entirely due to religion, if only because at this perilous moment in human history we need clear heads and accurate intelligence” (p.306). Haridas Chaudhuri (1984) was certainly clear headed and accurately intelligent regarding religion. He wrote in *Modern Man’s Religion*:

...religion is an autonomous function of the spirit. It can hardly be replaced by any non religious discipline. That which seeks to replace religion in a radically atheistic and anti-religious mood begins soon to function as a special kind of religion. So the great need of our present day is not to reject religion but to reconstruct it in accordance with the intellectual climate and the specific requirements of the present age. (p. ix)

Drawing on Chaudhuri’s notion of reconstruction, religion has been and can be (reconstructed if necessary as) a primary inspiration for global peace and social justice. Supporting this possibility is the claim that all the major world religions incorporate some version of the golden rule: “do unto others as you would have them do to you.” As noted by Rabbi Sydney Schwarz (2008) in *Judaism and Justice*, “According to God’s covenant with Abraham, every Jew [and I could add members of nearly every religion] is called upon not simply to *believe* in the values of righteousness and justice, but to *act* on them” (p.34). In their comprehensive histories of world religions, Karen Armstrong and Huston Smith document in extensive detail that the world’s religions attracted vast numbers of followers because they responded to a universal human longing for global peace and social justice.

If the teachings of the major world religions promote peace and social justice, then why are we living in an age tormented by religious wars? Charles Kimball (2008), professor of comparative religion at Wake Forest University, offers an answer in his book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*.

Kimball asserts that throughout history people have often “corrupted” traditional religion by aligning it with their violent intentions. Examining the history of world religions, Kimball identifies “five warning signs” that indicate that a religion is being “corrupted”: (1) absolute truth claims, (2) blind obedience, (3) ordained historical time, (4) ends justifying means, and (5) declaration of a holy war. Kimball’s five warning signs have one highly destructive element in common: exclusion.

The most potent antidote to exclusion is a progressive stage of inclusion—what we consider *pluralism*. With pluralism in mind, I turn to the first part of my assertion.

Interreligious Dialogue Requires Religious Pluralism.

Religious pluralism only exists in an environment where there is religious diversity, but religious diversity alone cannot guarantee religious pluralism. Religious pluralism requires consistent study, reflection, respect, and difficult conversation. Religious pluralism enables us to stand together despite profoundly held differences. While there are many similarities among the core beliefs of the world’s religions, religious pluralism is not a “melting pot” in which all religions become the same. The religious pluralism that can be a path to interreligious dialogue demands that we honor the integrity of each faith tradition as a distinctive and legitimate lens for viewing the sacred.

In his book, *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror*, Reza Aslan (2009) argues that the way to end a “cosmic war” is to avoid representing religious conflict as a cosmic battle between “good” and “evil.” Aslan insists that by moving war to the cosmic playing field, we elevate war. Rather, he contends that we need to see religious war for what it is; namely, people using religion to justify their worst intentions and deplorable actions. Aslan goes so far as to claim that religious pluralism, especially in local settings, could eliminate religious war. Through a series of compelling examples, Aslan makes a case to support his claim that Muslims become suicide bombers when they are marginalized, alienated, and disaffected because of their religion. If we can reverse this trend, we can move ourselves closer to world peace.

Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, and author of the autobiographical *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Patel, 2007), holds a view similar to that of Aslan. Patel noted that the 9/11 hijackers were examples of what happens when young men are recruited into exclusive and extreme religious fundamentalism². Patel (2007) calls us to embrace religious pluralism. He writes:

One Hundred years ago, the great African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois famously said, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” I believe that the twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line. On one side of the faith line are the religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of

²For a detailed account that provides support for Aslan’s and Patel’s arguments, please read Lawrence Wright’s (2006) Pulitzer Prize winning *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, in which Wright tracked the life journeys of each of the 9/11 hijackers.

one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, or condemned, or killed. On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. (p. xv)

Patel's book chronicles his engaging story of being raised a Muslim, learning about Mormonism in high school, Roman Catholicism in college, and Islam in graduate school. Each of his intensive contacts with various religions eventually brought him to reclaim his religious identity as a Muslim. He drew important lessons from each of the religions that he experienced; for example, from Roman Catholicism, he learned how to bridge religion and social responsibility when, as a student at the University of Illinois, he was a community member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker house in Champaign. He writes: "The most radical part about Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement was the insistence that everything the movement did was guided by a single force: *love*" (Patel, 2007, p. 50).

For a thorough study of the increasing religious diversity in the United States, I strongly recommend Diana Eck's excellent book, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (Eck, 2001). Eck drew on the research of her "Pluralism Project at Harvard," a project built on extensive interviews conducted by her students and herself of religious leaders and groups. Eck points out that religious...

Pluralism is not an ideology, not a leftist scheme, and not free-form relativism. Rather, pluralism is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences ... Pluralism is not a *given*—it must be *created*. (p. 70)

One of the most effective organizations engaged in promoting religious pluralism worldwide is the United Religions Initiative (URI) which provides models and training in creating circles of religious dialogue. Located in San Francisco and founded by William Swing, the former Episcopal Bishop of California and international peace activist, the URI is a ...

... global network of locally organized 'Cooperation Circles' acting to promote enduring daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing. Groups are called Cooperation Circles because they are formed by people of different [religious] traditions who come together to initiate acts of interfaith cooperation. (<http://www.uri.org/>)

The URI defines a Cooperation Circle as the basic unit of URI membership and consists of local or virtual groups that include at least seven members and at least three different religions, spiritual expressions, and indigenous traditions. (for more information see: http://www.uri.org/cooperation_circles)

Religious Pluralism Requires Religious Literacy

Stephen Prothero, professor of religious studies at Boston University, writes about the widespread religious illiteracy in the United States in his book *Religious Literacy: What*

Americans Need to Know (Prothero, 2007a). In his essay “Worshiping in Ignorance” published in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Prothero warns:

Religious illiteracy is more dangerous [than cultural illiteracy] because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture. Religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces of evil. (Prothero, 2007b, p. B6)

Later in the same essay, he points out:

Americans remain profoundly ignorant about their own religions and those of others. According to recent polls, most American adults cannot name even one of the four Gospels, and many high-school seniors think that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. (p. B6)

Prothero affirms that there are integrative connections among interreligious dialogue, religious pluralism, and religious literacy: he writes...

Each of the world’s great religions has wrestled for centuries with the foundational questions of life and death and whatever (if anything) lies beyond. Each has developed sophisticated theologies for making sense of other religions, for regulating war, [and] for fighting injustice. (p. B7)

Prothero points out that as a nation, the US is religiously illiterate; yet eighty percent of its citizens claim to be religious and/or spiritual.

This high percentage of national identification with religion and/or spirituality is reflected at colleges and universities among students who are very comfortable with religion and among faculty members who have an emerging interest in religion. Alexander and Helen Astin and the research team at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA are engaged in the longitudinal project, *Spirituality in Higher Education*. Periodically, they have been publishing reports based on the research from their extensive surveys, and they have published their findings in their book, *Cultivating Spirit: How Colleges Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives*. (Astin, A., Astin, H. & Lindholm, J., 2011). It has been my good fortune to have been a consultant on a mid-point developmental phase of this project. In the phase, teams from ten colleges and universities explored specific ways that they could encourage the spiritual growth of students because these institutions discovered that spiritual growth typically improved students’ academic performance and well being.

The UCLA 2003 survey of 112,232 students entering their first year at 236 colleges and universities and 3,680 third year students attending 46 institutions indicated that 80% of the students were interested in religion and/or spirituality and that they believed in the sacredness of life. In addition, 50% were on spiritual quests, 75% were searching for the meaning and purpose of life, 80% regularly attended services and discussed religion with friends, 75% believed in God, 71% were sustained by their religious and spiritual values and beliefs, and 66% prayed regularly.

In 2004-05, the UCLA research team surveyed 65,124 professors at 511 colleges and universities and reported the following results: 81% of the faculty members considered themselves spiritual persons, 70% stated that they were developing a meaningful philosophy of life; 69% sought opportunities to grow spiritually, 68% engaged in self-reflection, and 47% integrated spirituality into their lives. The 2004-05 faculty surveys revealed that faculty members who identified themselves as spiritual and/or religious scored significantly higher (better than 8 to 1) than their non-spiritual and/or religious counterparts in supporting students' personal development; and by a margin of 2 to 1 in favoring student-centered pedagogy and in advocating civic-minded practice and values.

While a majority of faculty members (57%) disagreed with the statement that "The spiritual dimension of faculty members' lives has no place in the academy," a minority (30%) agreed that colleges should be concerned with facilitating students' spiritual development. This determination was consistent with responses from third year students who noted "that their professors have never encouraged discussion of spiritual or religious matters, and never provide opportunities for discussing the meaning or purposes of life." However, many faculty members believed that the following educational goals were 'essential' or 'very important': enhancing self-understanding (60%), developing moral character (59%), and helping students develop personal values (53%). Lastly, the UCLA researchers examined faculty responses by discipline; and they found that the health sciences, humanities, and education were among the highest in believing that higher education should facilitate spiritual development and the social, physical, and biological sciences were among the lowest.

In studying both surveys, the UCLA team concluded that "it appears that colleges and universities are doing little to help students explore these issues and support their search in the sphere of values and beliefs." The team noted that "there is a sharp divide between students' interests and what happens in the classroom" This "sharp divide" raises a critical question for colleges and universities: should they reduce this divide" (for more information see Spirituality in Higher Education website: www.spirituality.ucla.edu).

As I stated at the beginning of this essay, colleges and universities are major keys to developing interreligious dialogue because they can educate their students in religious literacy, a prerequisite for religious pluralism which, in turn, is a prerequisite for interreligious dialogue. In short, we cannot understand, appreciate, or respect what we do not know.

Religious Literacy Requires Higher Education

I will suggest three steps that higher education should consider, and I will comment on plans that we are discussing at CIIS to advance religious literacy: 1) offer courses on the diversity of religious and spiritual practices; 2) integrate religion and spirituality throughout the curriculum; 3) increase awareness of and practice in social justice.

The first step that colleges and universities could take to cultivate religious literacy would be to provide students with opportunities to study a variety of religions. I agree with Professor Prothero that colleges and universities should require courses in religion for all academic major programs; and at the very least, they should require a course in comparative world religions.

Many higher education institutions are increasing their elective courses in religious studies, and enrollments have been exceeding expectations. At faith based colleges and universities where students can easily study and practice a religion, students should be encouraged to study religions other than their own.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the celebrated Trappist monk, wrote passionately about the dangers of knowing only one's own religion. He wrote:

We must ... admit with regret that, in the past, the tendency of Christians has been to regard all non-Christian religious experience as so obviously suspect as to be either too dangerous to study or else not worth the trouble of being studied. (Merton, 1967, p. 204)

Drawing on the traditions of contemplative practice in the East and the West, Merton pointed out that contemplative practice provides a fresh lens for interreligious study:

One of the most important aspects of interfaith dialogue has ...been one of the least discussed; it is the special contribution that the contemplative life can bring to the dialogue, not only among Christians, but also between Christians and the ancient religions of the East.... (p. 203)

Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), a Benedictine monk, established a religious and spiritual center in India near Bangalore. Griffiths enjoyed the respect of the local Hindus as they referred to him as *Sadhu*— a holy man. In his illuminating book, *The Marriage of East and West*, Griffiths (1982), like Merton, made a compelling case for knowing a faith other than one's own. He wrote:

It was not merely the desire for new ideas which drew me to India, but the desire for a new way of life. I remember writing to a friend at the time: 'I want to discover the other half of my soul.' I had begun to discover that there was something lacking not only in the Western world but in the Western Church. We were living from one half of our soul, from the conscious, rational level and we needed to discover the other half, the unconscious, intuitive dimension. (pp. 7-8)

At CIIS, in response to increasing requests that we offer more courses and public programs reflecting the broad diversity of religions and spiritual traditions, we are increasing our offerings in comparative world religions in our Philosophy and Religion Program as well as in our Public Programs. In fact, we are working with several faculty members in considering ways to expand the presence of interreligious dialogue at CIIS. Also, our Public Programs has been organizing events for the general public that are grounded in interreligious dialogue featuring leading figures such as Karen Armstrong, Coleman Barks, Daisy Kahn, Joan Halifax, and Cornel West among many others.

A second step that colleges and universities can take to advance religious literacy is integrating religion and spirituality throughout the curriculum. In her book *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters and How to Talk about it*, Krista Tippett (2007) rightly notes: "Religion has moved from the side lines to the center of world affairs and American life" (p. 9). It is not in

my opinion a stretch to argue that whether or not people believe in any particular religion, they need to study religion.

An excellent resource for integrating religions into the curriculum is *The Forum on Religion and Ecology*. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, Professors of Religion at Yale and co-directors of the *Forum*, believe that religions need to be in interactive dialogue with academic disciplines (including the natural sciences, ethics, economics, education, public policy, and gender studies) in order to develop comprehensive solutions to global, as well as local, environmental problems. The Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness program faculty work closely with Mary Evelyn and John.

Because much of higher education takes place outside the classroom, let us consider a third step that colleges and universities could take: increase awareness of and practice in social justice. Through activities such as service learning projects and student internships, we can help students engage in promoting social responsibility. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2005) has insisted, “The God who gave us the gift of freedom asks us to use it to honor and enhance the freedom of others. God, the ultimate Other, asks us to reach out to the human other” (p.3). Sacks emphasizes his point: “Jewish ethics is refreshingly down-to-earth. If someone is in need, give” (p.5). Sacks recognized the current urgency of charity and social justice: “Now, of all times, we should be holding out the hand of friendship to strangers, help to those in need” (p. 265).

To support students in this endeavor, colleges and universities can encourage campus interreligious and religious groups to live the social responsibility commitments of their spiritual and faith traditions. For example, students can help the homeless, tutor children of underserved populations, visit the abandoned elderly, serve non-profit organizations, and volunteer in community service programs.

Focus on community service at CIIS has been eloquently articulated in the *Beloved Community* initiatives at CIIS. In recognition of our many community service programs especially our six counseling centers, CIIS was invited and has become a member of Campus Compact, an organization that has both a state and a national network of colleges and universities engaged in community service. In spring of 2011, I forwarded the CIIS faculty and staff a preview of President Obama’s forthcoming Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. Certainly CIIS is meeting this challenge and we certainly will let President Obama know that we are.

Furthermore, we are currently in the process of developing the Chaudhuri Center with the mission to integrate contemplative practice, interreligious dialogue, and social justice. The Center, in effect, would incorporate all three steps that I have been recommending. The Center recently co-sponsored a lecture series on Interreligious Dialogue and Social Justice at the Interfaith Center at the Presidio. (for more information visit: http://www.ciis.edu/about_ciis/chaudhuri_center.html).

I will conclude my remarks by citing the last sentence of Karen Armstrong’s book, *The Great Transformations: The Beginnings of our Religious Traditions*:

Auschwitz, Bosnia, and the destruction of the World Trade Center revealed the darkness of the human heart. Today, we are living in a tragic world where, as the Greeks knew, there can be no simple answers; the genre of tragedy demands that we learn to see things from other people's points of view. If religion is to bring light to our broken world we need [...] to go in search of the lost heart, the spirit of compassion that lies at the core of all our [religious and spiritual] traditions. (Armstrong, 2006, p. 476)

We have a long and complex journey ahead of us if we wish to arrive at pluralistic interreligious dialogue, and higher education can significantly help us negotiate the many and seemingly insurmountable obstacles that stand in our way.

References

- Armstrong, K. (2006) *The Great Transformations: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Armstrong, K. (2009). *The Case for God*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf
- Aslan, R. (2009). *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Astin, A., Astin, H., and Lindholm, J. (2011) *Cultivating Spirit: How Colleges Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Chaudhuri, H. (1984). *Modern Man's Religion* (2nd Ed.). San Francisco, CA: Cultural Integration Fellowship.
- Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God Delusion*. London, U.K.: Bantam Press.
- Eck, D. (2001). *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Griffiths, B. (1982). *The Marriage of East and West*. Springfield, Il: Templegate Publishers.
- Hitchens, C. (2009) *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Hachette Book Group.
- Kimball, C. (2008). *When Religions Become Evil: Five Warning Signs* (Revised Ed.) New York: Harper Collins.
- Merton, T. (1967). *Mystics and Zen Masters*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Patel, E. (2007). *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Prothero, S. (2007a). *Religious Literacy: What every American Needs to Know*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Prothero, S. (2007b, March 16). *Worshipping in Ignorance*. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. B6-7.
- Sacks, J. (2005). *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Schwarz, S. (2008). *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.
- Tippett, K. (2007). *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters—and How to Talk about it*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.