**Interreligious Dialogue: A Critical Analysis**

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This course is intended to be an intensive, critical analysis of the interreligious dialogue project. It begins with a fundamental question that runs throughout the entire course: Is such dialogue even possible? Can members of different religious groups genuinely meet as equals, or does one group always have the discursive upper hand? Is there a hidden agenda in such dialogue? More particularly, is it possible for Christians to dialogically engage with non-Christians without, either consciously or unconsciously, translating the religious language of the other into the religious language of the self?

Many have argued that such translation is necessary and unavoidable, a given, but that it always involves a degree of transformation, a kind of rhetorical violence. Through reading and discussing a number of different perspectives within the interreligious discourse, we will attempt to explore these and other questions, with the aim of developing an acceptable methodological and ideological position. In other words, if one believes that interreligious dialogue is possible, then one must be very clear about one’s own modus operandus, and about the implications of this sort of dialogical praxis. On the other hand, if one does not believe that such dialogue is possible or critically acceptable, then one must be clear about why this is the case, and conscious of the implications of such a stance. Through open discussion and debate, this course is intended to help students find their own critical positions.

A guiding principle here is that interreligious dialogue involves risk, a kind of openness that necessarily makes one vulnerable, and that this vulnerability runs both ways. As Diana Eck puts it, interreligious dialogue involves the "energetic engagement with diversity." Iliff students are well versed in the language of diversity, but perhaps less adept at the energetic engagement piece. As Eck notes, in order to engage in interreligious dialogue, one must be willing to work at "the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference."

Most students come to my Interreligious Dialogue seminar eager to engage in conversations with people of other religious traditions; they want to talk with Muslims about Jihad and hijabs; they want to learn from Native Americans about sweat lodges; they want to sit at a Seder table with Jewish classmates. Before they do such laudable things, however, I ask them to engage in a more intimate sort of engagement with diversity: namely, that which exists within their own Christian traditions. I thus ask them to begin a series of dialogues with a classmate in which they explore and engage the kind of micro-differences that exist between them, differences in their theological assumptions, their ritual traditions, their core understandings of what it means to be a Christian in their day-to-day lives.

One of the things students quickly realize is that they are already engaged with religious difference. First, many of our students do not self identify as Christians, or at least not in a simple sense. They are already interreligious in their own identities, mixing as they do Christian theological and ritual traditions with various forms of "Pagan" practices and beliefs, with maybe a little Sufism and yoga and Kabbalah thrown in. Second, often they are not actively conscious of their own hybrid religious identities, and these small acts of dialogue help them understand that not only their own identities are complex mash-ups, but so too are their interlocutors.

After this dialogic exercise we all come back together and discuss what we have learned and how this is relevant to the larger context. It then becomes much easier to establish some basic principles of interreligous dialogue with them, beginning with the basic observation that no one's religious identity is monolithic: dialogue, then, involves the kind of external person-to-person difference and diversity that may seem obvious, but also a kind of internal diversity, across the religious traditions.

Students, then, are able to move out of this classroom dialogue into dialogue with Muslims and Jews and Hindus knowing that one cannot talk about "what Muslims believe" without also talking about individual Muslims, and the diversity of traditions within the tradition. In this way, I believe students are better able to engage the other, but also themselves, better able to see religious belief and practice as truly diverse and dynamic. It is my hope that this more complex understanding and engagement with diversity leads to a deeper mutual understanding.