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What I Learned from Christian Spirituality about Interreligious Studies

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I began my doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Union in 1995 with some trepidation. I was not at all sure that I had what it would take to successfully navigate a Ph.D. program or that this path was compatible with other aspirations such as starting a family. When I looked at the female faculty members who I admired as professionals, I realized none of them had children of their own. I saw few models of how to balance motherhood with the expectations and rigor of a life in the Academy. But after ten years, having given birth to two children, I felt a sense of both relief and gratitude as I walked across the stage to receive my doctoral hood from Judith Berling. She chaired my committee and encouraged me through the process with a sense of calm tenacity.

My boys are now in their mid-teens and I am now a tenured associate professor of interfaith studies at Andover Newton Theological School (ANTS) in Newton, Massachusetts where I also co-direct CIRCLE (the Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education). The foundation for the work I have done at ANTS was laid during my years at the GTU. Professors do not always get to hear

about the impact they have had on the many students who flow through their classrooms. Reflecting on the ripple effects in my own life and career, I want to share four insights that emerged during my doctoral studies and continue to be points of reference in the work I do now.

1. Christian Spirituality and Interreligious Studies are flip sides of the same coin

When people would ask me what it was like to do a Ph.D., I found myself saying that it was like trying to figure out my whole life. It was complicated, messy, surprising, infuriating and fascinating. For me it was also personal. The story line that led me to study religion began in many ways with my birth in South Africa to missionary parents. Religious identity was an early, oriented template through which I navigate the world and made decisions. In college I majored in South Asian studies and discovered religious worldviews profoundly different than my own. I spent my junior year in at the *School of Oriental and African Studies* in London where I simultaneously began attending a rowdy evangelical Anglican church. It was during this year that I had a numinous encounter with the Divine that deepened my commitment to Christianity and set me on a path towards seminary.¹ I was motivated by a desire to study my own faith tradition with the same depth and academic care that I had dedicated to studying the religious traditions of South Asia. So when I finally arrived in Berkeley, it made perfect sense to me that “Area 8,” in GTU’s lexicon of available doctoral degrees, was divided into two related programs: 8HR, “the historical and cultural study of religions,” and its sibling, 8S, the study of Christian Spirituality.

I am forever grateful that my academic formation was infused with both the sensibilities of comparative religious studies that Judith’s scholarship represents and a grounding in Christian Spirituality that

¹ I describe this experience in “God is Greater,” *My Neighbor’s Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Transformation and Growth*, Jennifer Peace, Or Rose & Gregory Moble, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012), 25-29.

Arthur's teaching and writing reflect. Many of the perspectives I developed through this dual focus, continue to influence my approach to Interreligious or Interfaith Studies. For example, I am struck by Sandra Schneider's description of Christian Spirituality as a "self-implicating" field of study. While accountable to the rigorous standards of academia, those who study Christian Spirituality tend to be motivated by personal as well as intellectual commitments. There is something at stake in their calling to this field. I would argue likewise, that Interfaith Studies is best understood as self-implicating. Whether there is a civic agenda at the heart of the work, an anti-bigotry focus, or a sense of obligation to understand the "religious other," scholars in this emerging field tend to have deeply rooted personal commitments that bridge theory and practice.

What I learned at the GTU about the relationship between attending to one's own religious practice in concert with the history and practices of other traditions, was animated through my work as board member in the early days of the United Religions Initiative (URI). Started by Bishop William Swing at Grace Cathedral, the URI was a remarkable laboratory for global interreligious cooperation that complimented and extended my academic study. From this twin experience I learned that the richest interfaith tables are laid with the diverse offerings we each have to bring from our own traditions. Rather than a watered down, apologetic sense of identity, this work invites deep and authentic practitioners willing to work together across differences for the sake of issues of shared concern. A colleague of mine at ANTS, theologian Mark Heim, captures this in his description of interfaith engagement as a "way of being Christian." This is a perspective that resonates with me given my own formation and experiences. As Heim points out, having a personal commitment and understanding of the value of one's own faith is a useful foundation for recognizing and appreciating the commitments and values of others.

2. Who says you can't compare apples and oranges?

One of the enduring insights for me from my doctoral work is the idea that we *know* by way of contrast. Judith Berling's careful attention to the dynamics of comparative work oriented me to ways of approaching the similarities and differences that define us and the traditions with which we identify. As I was developing a bibliography for my dissertation – a comparative exploration of the role of chanting at a Benedictine Abbey and a Hindu temple - Judith introduced me to the scholarship of Marilyn Waldman. I knew I had found a kindred comparativist when I read Waldman's assertion that it was perfectly reasonable to compare apples and oranges if the object of study was small round fruit. If Christian spirituality and interfaith studies seem like apples and oranges to some, Waldman's words are a helpful encouragement to look for the larger frame of reference that connects them. Keeping these fields as twin reference points makes sense to me if the task is framed as understanding my religious self in relationship to religious others.²

Another legacy of Judith's mentorship for which I am grateful is her capacity to invite creative scholarship while also maintaining respect for the boundaries of diverse disciplines. My gravitation to academia was driven by personal curiosity and questions that never seemed to fit neatly into the boundaries of conventional disciplines. I often had the feeling that the Academy was a structure designed with others in mind. Had I been the architect, I would have gone for a more open floor plan. The various spaces would be organized around essential questions rather than research agendas ordained by the conventions of historic disciplines. Judith helped me understand the diverse disciplines as conversations that had developed over time that we as younger

² See "Spiritual Other/Spiritual Self: Models of Transformative Interfaith Work," *Surjit Singh Lecture on Comparative Religious Thought*, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, February 2013.

scholars were being invited to join and help shape going forward. I gained new appreciation for the sheer time and effort it takes to immerse oneself in a particular conversation and learn enough to both join in and contribute to the dialogue. In this way, I found a balance between intellectual freedom and academic discipline in my doctoral studies that have continued to serve me well as I work with others to imagine the core questions, contours and boundaries that make up Interreligious Studies.

3. Teaching and Learning Matters

Beyond my interest in the subject matter, one of my primary motivations for doing doctoral work was to get the credentials I needed to teach in a college or seminary setting. My own college experiences had opened me to the power of learning in ways that were transformative. I wanted to participate in creating the conditions for others to experience similarly transformative learning.

When I first arrived at the GTU and asked my assigned advisor about provisions in the doctoral program for learning about the craft of teaching, he politely informed me that my question was one for the religious education department but that they no longer offered doctoral programs in this area. Fortunately, I soon met Judith Berling who modeled a commitment to both excellent scholarship and excellent teaching. She taught a course focused on teaching practices and course design that I still refer to for orientation or inspiration when I need to put together a new syllabus. She showed me how to set up the conditions for creating a shared learning community in the classroom. We as peers taught each other even as Judith framed and held the larger conversation. My work as the Curriculum Coordinator at the Center for Women and Religions during my time at the GTU further instilled in me a sense of the power and potential of this model for transformative learning. I take my role as a teacher very seriously. It is

my primary commitment as I work to balance the varied demands of being a faculty member and CIRCLE co-director.

4. What Christian Spirituality taught me about Interfaith Studies field-building

Finally, I'm grateful for how the interdisciplinary, innovative faculty at the GTU worked together in ways that sparked creativity and risk-taking in those of us who studied with them. As the first associate professor of Interfaith Studies at Andover Newton, I'm very involved and invested in the development of this emerging field. The pioneering work the GTU has done in both Christian Spirituality and their more recent embrace of Interreligious Studies, have been sources of both inspiration and practical support for my own work.

As a young doctoral student, I was inspired to be studying in a place where the founder of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality (SSCS), Sandra Schneider, served on the faculty. Years later I believe this was an important source of my own sense that I too could play a founding role in a new field. Having launched the "Interreligious and Interfaith Studies" group at the AAR in 2013 (along with my co-chair Homayra Ziad and an excellent steering committee) I have now turned my attention to creating an Association for Interreligious Studies drawing directly on the model of SSCS. The current president of SSCS, Lisa Dahill, who delivered a stirring keynote address at the Society's meeting held in conjunction with the 2015 AAR in Atlanta, was a fellow student with me at the GTU. Lisa is now advising me on the ins and outs of organizing an academic association. This connection and collaboration, more than 20 years after I started my doctoral studies, speaks to the kind of community that was cultivated through the efforts of folks like Arthur Holder and Judith Berling at the GTU.

As Andover Newton approaches a major transition in the life of the institution and many seminaries face tough decisions about how to carry out their educational mission in an age of declining enrollment, I am ever grateful for the lessons I learned from Judith Berling, Arthur Holder and many other mentors, professors and peers at the GTU: a willingness to cross disciplinary boundaries wisely, a capacity for uncovering new connections by comparing apples and oranges when necessary, a commitment to transformative learning accountable to community, and an appetite for intellectual risk-taking and trail-blazing. We don't always get to see the impact we have on our students. It is a pleasure to be able to extend my appreciation for the formative impact these scholars had on me as they approach their retirement.

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