A methodological approach to religious pluralism: Interreligious Dialogue Rooted in Shared Experience of the Religious Practices of the 'Other'

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Context: The Intersection between Comparative Theology and Religious Education

A primary feature of our culture in contemporary North America is plurality. Engaging with the religions and spiritual practices of other traditions is an inescapable fact of life in this context. Spiritual practices from a host of traditions are available not only in bookstores, retreat centers, but also in hospitals, public schools, and so on. Making sense of diversity and cross-fertilization is a complicated task but one that is of primary importance for theologians and religious educators alike. How do we regard our own religious identity and spirituality in light of the “other”? Moreover, how do we engage the process of religious education when students are aware of and/or drawing from a variety of spiritual resources? What is needed from religious educators and theologians in such a context is at minimum an accurate and informed understanding of other traditions. Better yet, religious education and theology should help individuals negotiate their religious and spiritual paths in this pluralistic context.

In the Spring 2009 C21 Resources Colleen Griffith states, “Christian spirituality presumes, through God’s grace, a human desire and capacity for growing in union with the Triune God… Renewed commitment to our baptismal promises is made possible by God’s grace, sustained by Christian community, and supported through engagement in meaningful spiritual practices” (1). This understanding of spirituality as an ongoing deepening within one’s own
tradition, however, occurs in the context of a pluralistic world. This pluralism impacts the experience and understanding of spirituality itself.

Sheldrake problematizes the notion of spirituality in a helpful way by looking at the history of the concept and its many iterations in different times and places. He asserts that “part of the contemporary problem with defining ‘spirituality’ is associated with the fact that it is not a single, transcultural phenomenon but is rooted within the lived experience of God’s presence in history” (41). In other words, an essential and defining feature of spirituality is that it responds to the location of the religion. And since our particular location is a pluralistic one, we must consider how this does and should impact teaching and appropriation of the various religions’ practices.

Fundamental questions about how religious educators address the social, cultural, and psychological implications of living in a pluralistic world have been broached within the field of religious education but not in ways that sufficiently engage with the content of the other traditions. Religious education would benefit from being aware of the methods and insights of comparative theology to do this. Religious educators could be a resource in supporting the capacity of the faithful to engage with other religions in dialogue and community. But this requires information and appropriate methodology. It also engages the fact that values that religious educators are situated to either support or obstruct tolerance and respect for diversity in their work. The fact is that religious educators transmit attitudes towards other religions through their teaching both explicitly and through the hidden curriculum of religious education. The various theologies of religion should not only be examined on theological grounds but also from the standpoint of discerning their degrees in engaging the needs of the faithful in a pluralistic world. But all of this presupposes that religious educators buy into the premise that
other religions are in some way relevant to one’s own tradition and the process religious
formation, which is not a widely held belief currently.

Given all of this, theologies of other religion and experiences with interreligious dialogue
should be a part of any religious education process. This means moving such concerns beyond
the domain of the academic and religious elite and finding models that are appropriate for such
settings. This is not intended to undermine the importance of scholars and religious leaders to
move forward in the domain of interreligious learning. But it is also essential that the grassroots
level of religious education also engage with attitudes and understandings of other religions. This
is the case because the realities of living in a pluralistic world impact not only scholars and
leaders in religions but are directly relevant to the faith and identity of everyone.

For the purpose of religious education it would be helpful to clearly delineate as much as
possible what would be needed to prepare people to engage with religious diversity in a way that
has integrity to their own community and tradition. It is essential to clarify what role
interreligious dialogue and accurate and/or sympathetic understandings of other traditions should
play in the religious education process for different ages, stages, and cultures and to assess how it
is currently functioning. Moreover, the process of relating to other religions could and should be
harnessed by religious educators as a resource for prompting theological reflection. But this will
require reframing the theologies of other religions to meet not only theoretical concerns but also
practical and pastoral needs. Religious education could push comparative theology to develop its
thinking on the role of pluralism in the life of ordinary people and to write in ways that are
relevant to the decisions nonprofessionals are called to make regarding their stances toward their
own faith and that of others.
Comparative theology could benefit from engagement with the practical and pedagogical orientation of the religious education perspective. There are many ways that the thinking in fields like education on topics such as creating inclusive and supportive learning environments could support the task of dialogue and engagement with the other. This kind of attention to process and the context of engagement is particularly important as engaging other traditions is inherently a challenging task. To encounter and experience an “other” requires a posture of openness to that which challenges core values and assumptions. Faith formation is a venue to help prepare people for such a task. It is also a potential setting for considering the most appropriate contours for encounters with other religions.

Despite the inherent challenge of such an enterprise, experience of the practices of other religions can serve as a basis for meaningful engagement with other traditions and has a far greater potential for generating insight and empathy than the study of texts and doctrine alone. This is not to negate the value of conceptual understanding of other religions but rather is an attempt to foreground the potential inherent in an embodied, experiential way of learning about and engaging with other traditions.

As this approach has not been much emphasized in the arena of interreligious dialogue or comparative theology it is necessary to carve out a space for it. Part of this process is to consider the significance that this alternative epistemology can make to the study of other religious

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1 Catherine Cornille made the point in the Introduction to comparative theology course that interreligious dialogue for the past thirty years has not been effective. In order for it to become effective changes will have to be made within religious communities to support the interest in dialogue. Her assertion that the natural stance of religions is not toward dialogue and that dialogue requires readiness greatly impacted my thinking on this subject. It highlights the need for religious education to play a key role in the process of tolerance and interreligious dialogue. The shape of this role is beyond the scope of this paper but is the topic I am planning to engage with in my dissertation. One key element of how I envision effective religious education is to use the experiential approach to learning about other traditions that I argue for in this paper.
It seems that there are three steps to discussing the implications of introducing practice-based epistemology into the arenas of comparative theology and comparative religious education. Laying out the theoretical basis for this work is the first step. The second step is to use the model and see what emerges. The third step is to adjust the model based on what is learned in the first two stages.

**Theoretical Basis For Practice Based Interfaith Learning**

Entering into the religious practice of another tradition can be a fruitful starting point for interreligious dialogue. Beginning with sharing practices rather than purely conceptual analysis offers the potential for a profound knowing of the other that is built on the simultaneous recognition of difference and appreciation of the other tradition’s richness. Sharing in practice offers the opportunity for engagement with the constitutive elements of the tradition of the conversation partner. This method offers the potential for engaging the epistemological basis of the other tradition. It offers the possibility of not only learning about the other but also actually learning from the other.

Experiencing the practices valued by another tradition can enhance empathy for and understanding of that tradition. This paradigm, however, is rooted in mutual understanding that the exchange seeks to broaden the perspective of those involved but that it is not targeted at conversion. The practice of the other tradition can shed light on its doctrine in a way that conceptual understanding alone will not. It can also foster insight into one’s own tradition by highlighting features that were not previously engaged. Another important feature of this method of dialogue is that it could be a way to engage more voices in interfaith learning beyond the academic setting or those who are part of the hierarchy of their faiths. It is a way to draw on
spirituality as a focus and to incorporate the assets of nondominant epistemologies and pedagogies (such as feminist).

My interest in practical models for engaging with interfaith learning and dialogue largely comes out of my perspective as a Buddhist. Much could be said about the Buddha’s approach to engaging with other religions and while this is an essential topic is beyond the scope of this present paper. But one key point is that the Buddha knew about the doctrine and practices of the other religions that existed around him. He was both well studied and well practiced in the other traditions. His input and critique of the religions is based on his own intimate knowledge of them. The criteria for Buddha’s challenge and exposition of another traditions were based on familiarity with their tenets and spiritual practices.

The Buddha exemplified a perspective on other religions that is rooted in a personal and experiential knowledge of core practices as well as doctrine. This in itself points to a model for us today that emphasizes engaging with the both the study and practices of other religions. The Buddha evaluated other traditions according to their capacity to engender the experience of insight. This indicates a model that engages with the experience of the other while acknowledging that they do so from their own value system and perspective. In other words, the highest priority of the person who seeks to learn about another tradition will be rooted in their own understanding of their own tradition’s primary purpose. Criteria for evaluating another religion emerges will emerge from one’s own religious values. But the process of engaging with other religions can be done in the spirit of openness and genuine inquiry with the attempt to know the other as they know themselves, as much as is possible within the limits of our own perspective. Engaging with another religion’s practices is a way to understand the other from our
own perspective. But the method also challenges us by creating encounters that will impact, stretch, and challenge our current perspective.

The KaNying lineage of Tibetan Buddhism that I practice emphasizes the significance of awareness prior to a sense of self. Meditation practices highlight the process of construction of the sense of self and point to a more fundamental way of being that precedes identity structured in thought and self-clinging. The relationship between awareness, thoughts, and sense of self are explored experientially in a variety of practices within the rushen, trekchod, and togal framework. Coming from this tradition has sparked my interest in the possibility to draw from ways of knowing that are not simply conceptual in my study of other religions. Also Tibetan Buddhism’s soteriology reflects a primary emphasis on practice and this itself influences my interest in learning about other religions through the exploration of their spiritual practices.

Gerardus van der Leeuw, one of the first to apply the use of phenomenology to the study of religion, expressed the futility of attempting a purely objective stance. He questions the integrity of the so-called objective study of religion with comments like, “how shall we comprehend the life of religion merely by contemplative observation from a distance” (van der Leeuw 420). Van der Leeuw emphasizes the requisite for a relational component to the study of religion. He sees this subjective component as an essential element given the complexity, breadth, and living nature of religion. According to van der Leeuw, subjectivity is the perspective engendered based on a relationship between the subject and the object. Van der Leeuw explains that the physicist must employ objective techniques “so that he can observe [his object] exactly, go around it, watch it from all sides, etc.” (400).

But this objectivity is only the beginning step and is insufficient as a means to obtain deeper goals of study, namely understanding of the essence of phenomenon. To proceed beyond
the initial objective phase of study, a more intimate relationship with the object of study must be negotiated. It is essential to notice that van der Leeuw does not negate the relevance of objectivity or historicity in the study of religion but rather says that for a complete understanding of an object there must be an interaction, or a relationship because this relationship yields a more useful understanding of the object. Van der Leeuw asserts that the study of religion cannot meet its intended goals through methodology that does not engage the experience of the subject. This conclusion supports a wholistic approach to comparative theology and interreligious dialogue beyond the study of texts alone.

Bernard Waldenfels, a German philosopher who visited Boston College this spring semester, engages with a phenomenology of attention. Through this exploration into the process of attention he elucidates the significance of ways of knowing prior to language, thinking, or judgment. He emphasizes the bodily and affective dimensions of knowing. He also speaks of the emergent ethics “from below” that come out of this exploration. This is another angle into the kind of knowing that this interfaith practice based mode of learning can foster.

Interpretation is a challenging process in any circumstances as we are vulnerable in the act of opening to the unknown. In Analogical Imagination, David Tracy suggests that in authentic interpretation, the reader is always in a relationship of intimacy with the text. This relationship is one of growth and risk for the reader precisely because they are willing to risk their current understandings of the world and of themselves in their openness to being changed and informed by the text.

The philosophical thinker… is finally an interpreter risking the possibility that the fundamental questions of the tradition will come alive again. All cultural critics are most faithful to their ownmost task when they become interpreters with all the risks, no longer aesthetically distancing themselves from the reality of the world disclosed but daring to be caught up in the creative risk of an interpretation (Tracy 154).
In other words, when a reader enters into the act of interpretation of a text she no longer is protected by the shell of objectivity. She becomes vulnerable to being formed by the text in her act of joining with the text in order to understand and interpret it. It is in this sense that the reader not only interprets the text but also is impacted and changed by the text. Entering into practices from another tradition is a vulnerable process, as anyone who has attempted it can readily understand.²

Another foundational element for a practice-based dialogue between religions emerges out of feminist epistemology, pedagogy, and theology. Feminist methods are an important resource for interreligious dialogue that has remained largely untapped. The emphasis on praxis and experience in feminist thinking supports a practice based approach to learning about other religions. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s writing about interpretation as a holy activity, the value of group interpretation, the importance of a hermeneutic of experience, and the significance of inclusive spaces has impacted my thinking on this arena.³ Practical theologian, Beverly Lanzetta, in her book Radical Wisdom speaks about the implications that gender has on women’s spirituality and this too has pointed in the direction of investigating how commonalities based in gender and culture can serve as a connecting point across religious traditions.

One opportunity for women’s groups of interfaith practice is that there is much in common for the participants at the same time as there are real and significant differences rooted

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² In the domains of philosophy and education, pragmatism supports the practice-based approach to learning about other religions. Charles Peirce’s exposition of emergent teleology and emergent epistemology is a relevant framework for the theory underpinning this method. This emergent teleology refers to the idea that understanding comes out of experience and that experience is the basis for knowledge. John Dewey’s epistemology and pedagogy similarly focuses on the centrality of experience in the learning process and highlights the role of embodied learning in the process of identity formation.

³ Wisdom Ways, Schussler Fiorenza’s practical book about engaging in feminist interpretation is a key source for the group that I founded.
in religion among other factors such as race, economic status, education, and age. The imperative of praxis in postcolonial feminist theory points to the significance of solidarity across differences. Moreover, engaging in spiritual practices across traditions is skillful as the women can start to bridge divides across differences in ways that then extend to others in their communities. This is similar to how service often functions as a bridge to building community across difference. Shared spiritual practice can similarly be a basis for building interreligious tolerance and understanding.

**Implications Gleaned through the Application of Practice Based Epistemology: Case Study**

As a Tibetan Buddhist studying theology at Boston College, I am interested in learning more about the spirituality of the Catholic tradition to gain a better understanding of Christian theology. I initiated a small group to experiment with an interfaith, circular practice-based method earlier this fall. Inspiration for the group came out of considering how the many theoretical sources sketched out above imply an alternative way of learning. I was interested in this as a way to supplement my own engagement with the study of Christian theology as an “outsider.” I have experienced various elements of Christian public prayer life but I was interested to learn more about other forms of spirituality and to create a context in which to do so.

Some of my personal goals for this group were to supplement my learning of Christianity and Catholicism. Also, I was interested in developing a genuine interfaith community that draws on the wisdom of various traditions of practice rather than watering them down into one unrecognizable amalgam. After studying with Colleen Griffith for several years now, I have become aware of and interested in Catholic forms of spirituality and how they provide a fruitful basis of exploration for comparative study. One of the key criteria I have been concerned with
from the start is exploring nonhierarchal, feminist models of dialogue and alternatives to the
formal and professional iterations of interreligious dialogue that are so prominent. I began to
wonder what ways of knowing might emerge in a more informal setting when women who are
strongly committed to their faith explore together.

I contacted a group of women in late September inquiring whether they would be
interested in a group where we explore the connection between spiritual practice and our life in
an interfaith context. The group of approximately six women has been meeting every other week
since our beginning in mid October. We range in age from late twenties to early forties. Each
session consists of a practice session followed by a circular discussion. The women alternate
leading the practice and discussion. An informal process is intended to facilitate the forging of
relationships and a comfortable environment where the women can speak freely about how their
practice and faith are appearing in their lives. The informal structure (it meets in homes rather
than institutional settings) and shared leadership (the women alternate leading the group) can
serve as a model for the kinds of feminist methods in an interfaith context. The focus on
experience in conversation with practice and theology is indicative of both the feminist and
practical methodological frameworks.

In each meeting one person leads the group in a spiritual practice from their tradition.
Following the practice session the participants discuss how the practice intersects with key issues
in their lives, and in relation of their own experience of their traditions. It is an opportunity to ask
questions of one another about practice and doctrine, make connections between traditions, and
recognize/explore differences. We are explicitly not coming together in an effort to mix together
the various traditions but to experience and engage in each other’s practices in their own
specificity and difference. The themes for discussion have emerged organically out of the
practices and conversation among the women. An important feature of the emphasis on practice is that we come together and have a shared experience of a religious practice rather than beginning a conversation as an intellectual or as a representative of a religion. It is a place where people can speak about their own theological reflection in a personal way.

In our first meeting, I led a twenty-minute meditation from the Buddhist tradition in which the meditator visualizes a benefactor and receives the wish of love from that person into body and mind. We each shared who our benefactor was and spoke a bit about them as our structured discussion. I noticed that several of the Catholic women tended toward a primarily communal experience of the benefactors more than people generally do in other settings where I have taught the practice. Several women commented that for them the benefactor emerged in a context of a community and doing it individually felt uncomfortable or alien. One of the women commented in reflecting on this saying that when she started with practice; she didn’t feel like an other to this new experience. She was surprised that she didn’t experience “religious boundaries” or cultural or ethical ones but it felt natural to practice together.

A fascinating dynamic of the conversation was the fact that in this method what emerged was the perspectival difference that religious practice makes in the interpretive patterns of the receiver. The insights and reactions that the women voiced were distinctly different kinds of observations than the type of comparative analysis that are generated by study of texts or doctrine. An example of this is that it is a different type of insight to make a claim that benefactor practice in the Tibetan tradition and the Communion of Saints share some comparable features based on having read about the practices. It is a different event altogether to say the same thing after experiencing the practice of the other and hearing/recognizing the importance that the practice has to the other. The stated analysis may be the same but the empathy generated
is different. Moreover the embodied learning that happens from engaging in a practice cannot be replicated on a conceptual basis alone. These qualities of empathy and embodied experience seem clearly relevant to the success of interreligious dialogue, which further mitigates for this kind of experiential approach to learning about the “other.”

The day of our second meeting we were led by one of the women in an exercise she described as cinema *lectio divina*. Much of our conversation focused on the role of symbol in the film and how we experienced those symbols. We spoke about ways that symbols play into our own practice and faith life and how the religious symbols impact how we make meaning in our personal lives. It was clear in the exchange that the informality of the setting allowed for a different kind of theology than we normally do in our lives and work. Despite the fact that we are all self-defined practical theologians it was clear that it is much more comfortable to speak from our experience in ways we wouldn’t feel comfortable to do in a classroom. This insight mitigates for informal settings as an asset for some types of interfaith dialogue.

Our third meeting we met on the day of the saints and did a modified version of the rosary inserting prayers and female figures from various traditions based on the design of the woman leading. This session was actually the most melding in terms of the practice and it challenged my preconception that we should share in each other’s practice as we do it on our own… But the thoughtful way that the practice was laid out actually did not feel like watering down. This experience has led me to question some of my own ideas about the possibilities of modified practice for the purpose of interreligious groups but I would still not say that I endorse this method at this point. This combining approach has generally not been my favored angle on interfaith practice, as I feel concerned about combining various things due to the seeming inevitability of losing the power from each in the process.
In our most recent meeting I led the practices of nonconceptual meditation and self-inquiry. Out of this experience the women, some of whom had no conceptual framework for these practices or analogous practices in the Hindu tradition caught onto their significance. In fact it almost seemed as though the lack of self-identification as a Buddhist facilitated their ability to just do the practices in a wholehearted and effective manner. Out of this practice session the women drew on their own understandings of psychology and cognitive theory about where thoughts come from or ways that identity is formed. They recognized the key point of the practice from being entered into it experientially, which is the experience of seeing the process of identity formation differently. I feel confident to say that were they to go on and study about Buddhism they would be equipped with a compass for understanding core doctrine and rituals far more readily what they would have gotten without this practice experience.

**Conclusion: Further Directions**

Having sketched out the rationale, theoretical framework, and some anecdotal information about this practice-based approach to interfaith dialogue it remains to reflect on the process and consider further directions. All in all, this approach seems to address its stated goals of offering an alternative model to interfaith learning that provides unique and significant insights for the participants. Much learning about each other’s traditions has occurred over the past months. Also there has been a palpable sense of interpersonal care and community that has formed.

Going forward, I would be interesting in balancing the number of participants from the various traditions. Moreover, I have a number of emerging questions that I would like to further explore both theoretically and in practice. What would the impact be of having a group comprised of two traditions or of multiple traditions? Also, would it be possible to keep the
circular structure when working with a less educated or well-practiced group? What would happen to the learning process if there were people brought in to lead the spiritual practices or facilitate the group discussion? What would happen if the group was comprised of individuals that had differing levels of experience and information from one another? What are the implications of a small group versus a large group? Does it help or harm the process for the group participants to know or work together? What is the benefit or cost of having a women’s interfaith group as opposed to mixed gender? What modifications would be needed in applying this process to different age groups?

Another next step in this work is to return to the social work literature and educational literature about group processes. I want to further consider how insights from these disciplines might move along our interreligious learning processes and models within comparative theology and religious education. I plan to run another pilot group to test out the next iteration of this model as the practical application component has been essential in working on such issues.

I would also be very interested to hear from participants in the Engaging Particularities Conference about how experience of the spiritual practices of the religion they are studying has informed their understanding, work, and faith. Lastly, I would be interested to discuss what difference the structures and processes of interreligious dialogue or interfaith learning made to individual’s process of learning about the other or sharing of themselves? What experiences have been productive and educative and why? And what forums are counterproductive or less stimulating for learning and communicating across difference. It is clear that the nature of developing models for interfaith learning is an iterative and collaborative endeavor by nature and one that can be best approached by drawing on as many perspectives as possible.
Works Cited


