

OFFERINGS ON INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Harvard Divinity School

Office of Student Life

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Edited by Kate Mroz (MTS '13), co-coordinator of the 2012 HDS Orientation Program

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Introduction

On a couple of previous occasions, the Office of Student Life has produced a publication similar to this one—a booklet dedicated to exploring interfaith dialogue in the words of some of our esteemed faculty, staff, and students. But it has been a while and we thought it was a good time to bring this offering back. The themes running through this book are at the core of the mission of Harvard Divinity School, and we hope these passages will provide you fodder for the discussions that lie ahead in your classrooms, communities, in the café, and beyond.

To be sure, there is no right way of *doing* interfaith dialogue. Whenever a plurality of people engage in conversation with one another and bring their whole authentic selves, disagreement and misunderstanding will abound. The point of course is to engage—to adopt a posture of openness and receptivity, and most importantly, deep respect. The goal of such dialogue is not ultimate agreement and harmony, but peace and a greater depth for humanity. Accordingly, the writings presented here do not provide a *how-to* guide for engaging in interfaith dialogue in the world, or even at HDS. Please do not take them as such. What they do provide is a sense of the challenge set out before you, some suggestions, advice, pointed questions, and illuminations of potential problems. They are generous offerings from some very thoughtful members of our community.

Harvard Divinity School has a deep tradition of promoting the importance of interfaith dialogue. It is likely that you are part of this community because you share this commitment and we know that your presence here will enrich the collective growth of this community. Krister Stendahl, one of our most cherished colleagues—former professor, Dean, and Chaplain, and world leader in interfaith dialogue, was a great elucidator of interfaith dialogue and provided the most pointed and helpful advice I can summon. The essential principles he laid out are to,

- 1) let the other define herself ('Don't think you know the other without listening');
- 2) compare equal to equal (not 'my' positive qualities to the negative ones of the other);
- 3) and find beauty in the other so as to develop 'holy envy.'

While simple in their presentation, these suggestions require deep commitment and learning to achieve. Harvard Divinity School strives to provide you a framework of learning and experience to collectively achieve these principles.

The opportunities to learn and explore at HDS abound. With a breadth of courses provided from world-class scholars in their disciplines at HDS, the wider Harvard community, and the Boston Theological Institute, one can learn countless languages and gain knowledge that expands one's capacity to understand the spectrum of faith traditions. Many classroom discussions are designed intentionally to foster the exploration of personal values and meaning and to promote engagement with one's peers. Countless activities, workshops, lectures, and seminars are available to explore particular areas of knowledge. A weekly Noon Service is hosted by members of various faith and practice traditions for all members of the HDS community, and there are also numerous weekly tradition-specific spiritual practice and religious worship offerings on our campus. The Field Education program allows you to engage with the surrounding

community and gain precious hands-on experience. For every interest and passion, there is a representative HDS student organization that provides opportunities for connection and programming. There are many outlets for scholarly work related to interfaith dialogue, such as *Cult/ure*, the online scholarly journal for HDS students; the *Wick*, the arts and literary journal for HDS students; and the *Stendahl Conference on Conversations Across Religious Boundaries*. There are countless programs and opportunities for engagement provided by the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, as well as the Center for the Study of World Religions—a hub for interfaith work and discussion. The Pluralism Project provides world-class resources and knowledge, and the libraries at Harvard are peerless. Not to mention the wider Cambridge, Boston, and New England communities, which are steeped in history and religious diversity. If interfaith engagement and learning is important to you, we certainly feel there is no better place to be.

With all that said we hope that you create your own path here and engage in your own way. Use this booklet as a resource, and learn along with your HDS colleagues in the days to come, but know that there will not be an unambiguous path to success. Be generous in both the sharing of yourself and the receiving of others and you will find learning and growth around every corner.

With much peace,
Tim Whelsky,
Assistant Dean for Student Affairs

Religious Diversity and Comparative Theology

Francis X. Clooney

Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology; Director of the Center of the Study of World Religions

We live in a world where religious diversity is increasingly affecting and changing everything about us, and ourselves as well. No religious community is exempt from the pressures of diversity, or incapable of profiting from drawing on this new religious template. No community, wherever it is and however it is configured, will casually abandon its traditional commitments and practices in the face of religious diversity. If we are trying to make sense of our situation amidst diversity and likewise keep our faith, some version of comparative theological reflection is required.

While religious diversity can justly be celebrated as enormously interesting, it is also an unsettling phenomenon for people who actually are religious. Individual religious traditions are under internal and external stress as they are challenged to engage an array of religious others. Some find themselves under siege, threatened by a bewildering array of religious possibilities; some withdraw and demonize their others; some, perhaps too accommodating, begin to forget their identities. Some of us are relatively untouched by the phenomenon, but none of us avoids changing inside and out.

If we want to take diversity and religious commitment seriously, then there is a need for comparative theology, a mode of interreligious learning particularly well suited to the times in which we live. When I speak of “comparative theology,” I argue the case for keeping “theology” and “comparative” together, precisely for the sake of specific acts of interreligious learning appropriate to our contemporary situation. Doing theology comparatively will be more and not less fruitful, when diversity is most evident and most intensely felt.

Like all forms of theology, comparative theology is a form of study, faith seeking understanding. It is true that a commitment to study religions may seem a less than urgent response to what is happening in our world today, a detour that distracts us from our own traditions, perhaps even speeding up the dissolution of particular commitments. But in fact, the cultivation of a more interconnected sense of traditions, read together with sensitivity to both faith and reason, grounds a deeper validation and intensification of each tradition.

The context for today’s comparative theology is growing religious diversity. Diversity in and among religions is not novel, but its impact has intensified in recent decades as a pronounced and defining phenomenon that is global but still impacts us in the

particular places where we live. Fluid immigration patterns have brought people of many religious backgrounds together in the places where we live and work. Religious traditions previously foreign to one another now flourish nearby to one another. It is by habit that we still apply tidy labels such as “Eastern religions” and “Western religions” to religions that are taking root everywhere; by habit, some of us still imagine that “other religions” are to be found only in far-off parts of the world. In varying degrees of proximity and intensity, all religions are near to us; whether we are conscious or not, they are becoming part of our lives and influential on our religious identities.

The challenge impacts us more forcefully as a vast increase in available knowledge about religions creates new learning possibilities. Religious traditions are vividly present in every kind of media. Never before has so much been available so easily, in such quality. As never before, we can learn easily about other religions, but we need to learn deeply across such borders. Even were we to limit our attention to theological concerns, we would be on the spot, since we now have available to us an abundance of great theological texts from many traditions, in accessible translations with ample annotations. It is easy to read, and harder than ever to justify not reading inside and outside my own tradition.

Our time and place therefore urge upon us a necessary interreligious learning. Diversity becomes a primary context for a tradition’s inquiry and self-understanding; particular traditions in their concreteness become the place where the religious meaning of diversity is disclosed. By such learning, intelligently evaluated and extended, we make deeper sense of ourselves intellectually and spiritually, in light of what we find in the world around us. We can respond to diversity with a distinctive set of sensitivities and insights that balances respect for tradition and community with the wider play of what is possible in our era, such as none of our traditions has been able to anticipate.

Where it is possible to learn, there is also a responsibility, if we are not artificially and arbitrarily to cut short our quest to understand our faith. So much information, so easily available, should puncture religious stereotypes and free us of stereotyped judgments about other religions that persist simply as bad habits. We should be increasingly reluctant to confuse the necessary shorthand claims we make about religions — we cannot ever say all that needs to be said — with the full, adequate accounts of those traditions. Theologians have particular responsibility, since the public credibility of faith positions relies in part on our demonstration that we are interreligiously literate, knowing what to say, how to make measured judgments within the bounds of our learning, and when also to stop speaking about things beyond our expertise. Other religions are not less complex than our own, and there is

no reason, no excuse, for not acquiring credible knowledge about them. This learning, and how we use it, is the challenge of comparative theology.

But diversity not only envelops us, it works on us, gets inside us; if we are paying attention, we see that attentiveness to other religions affects even how we experience, think through, and practice our own religion. Religious choices become more urgent and more complex, even among people with continuing religious commitments. To make sense of their own faith lives, individuals have to make choices regarding how to form and balance their religious commitments.

Individual sensitivities heightened in the face of diversity in turn unsettle traditions, as more people find at home only some of what they seek spiritually. Communities may find their most alert members deeply affected by what's going on religiously around them, and accordingly more tentative and fluid in their commitments, more acutely aware of the possibilities available in other religious traditions. At the same time, our culture fosters personal, individual responses to the multiplicity of religious options. (Overly) critical questioning may undercut the learning that traditions have passed down, and raise doubts about whether any particular wisdom is really absolutely superior to other ways of living spiritually and well. Religious diversity, thoughtfully understood, raises awkward questions that can make an exclusive choice seem almost impossible. Perplexed by diversity, we may seek excuses not to take it seriously, on the grounds of the sanctity and sufficiency of our own religion. Or we may find relativism the easier path to tread. But we are better off if we keep paying attention to the dynamics of diversity intelligently and with the eyes of faith. Whatever our commitment and intentions, we need to be able to make intelligent religious choices about where we belong and how we shall be committed. Individuals themselves will make such choices, but cumulatively their choices affect how religious communities remain viable places where God is to be known and worshipped in a religiously diverse world.

Francis X. Clooney, SJ

(Adapted by the author from Chapter 1 of his *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)

But You Wear a Yarmulke!
Religious Expectations in a Multi-Faith Community

Ryan Adams, MTS 2013

I get these kinds of statements a lot because of what I wear:

“Should you be doing that?”

“You are the first one I’ve seen whose not like that.”

“I didn’t know that you were allowed to do that.”

And after almost every answer to those inquiries, the same question usually follows:

“But you wear a yarmulke!”

Indeed I do, but the fact that I wear a yarmulke does not mean that I must perform Judaism in a way that people have become accustomed. That is part of the joy of being at Harvard Divinity School: it is highly likely that you will encounter many people who do not ‘do’ religion in the way that people are accustomed. It is, in fact, one of the things we are quite proud of here; we have a diverse accepting community.

That being said, it is important to engage in conversation in a way that respects the radical uniqueness of this community, rather than in a way that might guilt or shame. So how does one navigate such a sensitive topic?

My answer, as with most things, revolves around ice cream. In Judaism, there are a lot of different flavors of belief and practice. It is like a Baskin Robbins: 31 Flavors. Some are pretty vanilla and are widely enjoyed. Others are a bit more exotic. Some flavors of Judaism have nuts in them, so those who are allegoric should avoid at all costs. Some flavors of practice and belief go well together while others you would never enjoy together and could not fathom someone else enjoying it together or apart.

I won’t belabor the metaphor beyond this: faith and practice aren’t like soft serve ice cream, where there are two simple flavors that remain the same no matter how many toppings you add. People are complicated. Yet exploring these nuances will give you the experiences you came to Harvard Divinity School for; they are part of the fun! So while having this fun, I would recommend language that does not constrict through assumptions, but instead opens up a space for the person to be who they are. “How do you feel comfortable identifying?” or “How did you come to your practices?” are just suggestions with which to start.

The greater Boston area has all the flavors you could ask for; I look forward to tasting them with you and seeing how they change our palates together.

Thoughts on the Humanist, Agnostic, and Atheist Perspective

Kye Flannery, MDiv 2014

Sometimes in Divinity School it feels like I'm at a wedding, and there is an aisle, the humanist or nontheist friends on one side and the folks who identify with a religious tradition on the other, and I'm desperately hoping these two families will find a way to speak to one another.

If you are a humanist, an agnostic, or an atheist person in Div School, you'll likely engage in interfaith dialogue -- and since you're here, that probably means you're up for it. I can share some of the insights around interfaith dialogue I have gained after 2 years at HDS, and doing interfaith work in other settings. I've never had heavy objects thrown at me during one of these conversations, which seems like a good sign. (Heavy theological concepts? Yes. An end table? No.) These have proven good starting points for me:

It is helpful first to ask what I have faith in. What are some of my deepest abiding truths, and how did I come by them? (Start with gravity if you have to.) Who are my heroes? What calms me when I have a nightmare? What is so full of beauty it makes me cry? What inspires me?

Be ready to go beyond words. The Enlightenment gave us many beautiful things. Art! Science! Philosophy! But — heretical, I know — sometimes our words and concepts protect us from tapping into the deepest parts of our felt experience, the depths of our being. People of faith are not afraid to be silent, and rest in the sacred. I can protect myself with rationality sometimes — from my colleagues in Div school, I am learning not to run from silence and emotional depth.

I have never found value in declaring that "science" says there's no God. First, science as I understand it doesn't say that. (Consider the Higgs-Boson or "God particle.") Second, declarations of this sort are not nearly as interesting as asking how people understand the divine. Hearing people describe how they experience the divine is a privilege. Sometimes it brings up pangs of sorrow for me -- I don't have that personal God figure. But if I can hold my own pain in that moment, I can get through to hearing clearly the person in front of me, and begin listening for commonalities.

Don't get offended when people wonder what the heck you're doing in seminary. You are truly welcome here, though some might be mystified by your motivations. You just may need to do some extra work with friends and colleagues to articulate

what brings you here. Don't worry, even my most hardcore atheist friends have gotten over the shock.

Don't assume you're an outlier. I have been in a dialogue group this summer through a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program, with a group of devout people (Catholic, Episcopal, Seventh Day Adventist and UCC). I had the opportunity to ask if they felt less emotionally open with me because I don't share belief in a God figure. To a person, they said, with love, no way. I'd been feeling a little like a black sheep. Turns out I was getting in my own way, creating an "outsider" label that nobody else saw.

Don't assume people of the same religion share anything besides a label. Ask two Catholics about Mary Magdalene or the Book of Thomas and see what happens.

Don't hold other people responsible for your wounds. We all have our woundedness, and sometimes we trace it to a religious tradition. People of all faiths and of no faith can be inhumane. We must be brave enough to move into the space and make ourselves vulnerable in order to forge relationship.

Be able to define your humanism, agnosticism or atheism, in a way that's a positive and doesn't detract from other people's convictions. Do you have a set of foremothers and forefathers you can go to when you feel shaken? (For instance, I love — love — *Cosmos*, old and new.)

If you are *talking* to a humanist, here are some things you might think about to make the conversation welcoming and fruitful.

Make your side of the conversation as concrete as you want. Be brave about articulating what you believe. Belief is beautiful, and you've come by yours as honestly as I've come by mine. I want to know where you are, to understand how belief has changed your life.

Don't assume you know what "humanist" means. Or "atheist." Sometimes I am afraid people don't want to know my story because it will hurt their belief. But I think if we are truly grounded in our traditions, our differences can't hurt us — and then we get to openness, we are free to bravely explore our commonalities. Strains of humanism appear in many religious traditions and I take joy in finding those common spaces.

In common prayers, you can choose inclusive language. I've heard prayers called "intentional space," "meditations," "time of reflection." Those all can open up space

for the sacred. God language is also a cool place where I've seen people choose to be inclusive. "Spirit of Life," "Great Spirit," "Spirit of all," "Breath of life," "That which makes the flowers grow," "Great healer." Some call this "watering down," but I find that characterization a difficult one to swallow. If I am at the bedside of a patient who loves Jesus, I will pray to Jesus with all my heart. If I am in a room with people who call God many things or who do not work with that concept, I will do my best to make sure that we can all join that space together.

Thank you for the gift of your heart and your conversation, and welcome to HDS.

A Few Critical Questions in Multireligious Work
Some Friendly Suspicions and One or Two Suspicious (or Suspect) Friends
Informal Notes from the Field

Kerry A. Maloney
Director of Religious and Spiritual Life

The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (RSL) seeks to support the nurture and integration of the spiritual and intellectual life for all members of the Harvard Divinity School community. One of the principal purposes of the department is to provide significant resources for the engagement of the multireligious and multicultural population of HDS. RSL is unequivocally committed to the promotion of religious pluralism at HDS, encouraging a climate in which the extensive spiritual and religious differences among us are respectfully and fruitfully engaged, not merely tolerated.

Other contributors to this publication have articulated well some of the necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for the emergence and flourishing of that kind of climate. In recent decades, HDS has made genuine progress in realizing some of our aspirations on this front, but we still—and, likely, ever will—have substantial work to do to achieve them fully, in both our curricular and our co-curricular life.

Even as we advance in this urgently necessary and exciting work, we need constantly to critique not only our progress but also the assumptions and power structures that underlie—and constantly shift beneath—the project itself. The following is a preliminary set of questions we might ask both at HDS and in any setting in which we find ourselves engaged in multireligious work. There are many other questions to be discovered and answered in the course of this work; these represent only a starting point.

1. Beyond the exigencies of the increasing religious and ethnic diversity of the United States (and the glaringly obvious need to heal the violence in the world issuing from conflict over religious and ethnic difference), how much of the interest in intentionally multireligious work is being inspired and driven by the despair of the formerly normative religious class in this country (mainline, liberal Protestantism); that is, how much of this movement is being driven by liberal Protestants who have lost their place of privilege on the religious scene? (*Cui bono?*)
2. A closely related question: Are we opting (*all of us engaged in this work, regardless of our native traditions*) for inter-religious conversation and

cooperation because intra-religious work has become so difficult as to be impossible in some quarters?

3. Practically and *concretely*, how do/can multireligious coalitions of any kind responsibly patrol the borders between religious relativism and religious pluralism? Can (should) there ever be an ethically specific center to a group or institution's work which transcends the mere mandate to represent all ethical and religious voices of its constituencies equally? If so, how can that center be discerned and articulated enough to identify and foster a genuine institutional identity and mission which transcend but respect the diversity of the institution's make-up?
4. A closely related question: Are we truly working to avoid a slide into functional relativism, even when we would reject such a posture? Most, if not all of us, agree that we aim to avoid the promotion of relativism, but in the crush of the work before us—and the need to present it publicly with a positive spin to our respective home institutions or communities and their constituencies—how often is this careful, methodical work simply left undone?
5. To what extent is the very concept of multireligious work itself a product of a (nominally Protestant) post-Enlightenment cultural project? How aware, and critical, of this possibility is the multireligious movement and those in leadership of it? Here, the limits of the underlying optimism of this movement may reveal themselves as points of tension and concern while the operative goals of the project are pursued—and frequently, missed. What are we really hoping to achieve in multireligious coalitions? On close inspection, some of us might discover that we believe we simply need to meet and, so, to understand each other *in the hope* that significant conflict will, if not evaporate, be ameliorated and that potential antagonists will be mollified. Or we may discover our real hope is that despite our endless differences, we are at base the same. What happens when this strategy fails?
6. True engagement across religious and ethnic difference will—and should—inevitably raise and air serious points of disagreement, conflict and pain. How genuinely well prepared are most multireligious coalitions not only to

handle these matters when they arise but to *invite* and *foster* them in the first place? How many truly effective resources have we collected and used (or have we assembled in preparation for use) in this work—for instance, competent family therapists, mediation specialists, persons with extensive training in conflict management, etc.?

7. In multireligious coalitions, how can we avoid tokenizing (or simply exerting undue pressure on) those who are in the numeric minority in our demographic slice of the local landscape, whether that slice be in our city/region, on our campus, in our hospital, or in another institution with which we are affiliated and for which we have some religious and spiritual responsibility? Beneath this possibility lurks the danger of instrumentalizing—and, worse, exoticizing—the very persons whose religious agency is allegedly being advanced by a multireligious vision; that is, how much are those who are seen to be “in charge” of multireligious work in any given institution in need of people who can represent the numeric religious minorities in their midst in order to proceed with their agenda? This need is quite legitimate and urgent if a group is indeed to represent fairly *all* the constituencies, however small or large they may be, in its region; but it can also risk inauthenticity if the main need is to advance the conveners’ and institutions’ legitimacy in the community. Again, the danger of exoticizing and exploiting, however inadvertently, anyone who is “other” than the locally normative religious and ethnic identity/ies is ever present. What strategies are in place to prevent this scenario and, when it happens, to redress it? What systemic structures of support exist for those in the numeric minority in our institutions and communities?
8. A closely related question concerns the presumption of fixed personal identities. We each evolve differently across time, so different people actually come to the table each time we gather these coalitions even if the membership is stable. Do these coalitions allow people to change their minds and hearts, or do they inadvertently reify their stances (and perhaps squelch their intellectual and spiritual development) by forcing them into potentially static roles as spokespersons for traditions?
9. How much do multireligious coalitions—wherever they gather—address the inherent weakness of the uneven nature of their constitution? Indeed, how much *can* they address this matter without inciting some of the conflict they are ostensibly seeking to heal? At issue here is the assumption that those

around any given table are equally well informed about and can represent their traditions (let alone speak authoritatively about those traditions) adequately and with relatively equal weight. It is possible to be held religiously hostage by some people—the “one or two suspicious or suspect friends”— in any dialogue or exchange. A few difficult types in this category include the ideological religious bully; the insecure and overcompensating authority figure; the benignly mis/underinformed but ever-eager teacher; and the unduly timid and insecure draftee who refuses to speak or act at all because of a lack of adequate training.

10. To what extent can a multireligious agenda mask (or even suppress) the boundless internal diversity within traditions, subtly presenting relatively monolithic depictions of each tradition—even while denying that it aims to do so—in an effort to portray a neat and functionally manageable picture of religious diversity within a given institution, such as a university or a hospital?

11. What of the vast (and growing) number of people who claim, and are claimed by, no religious tradition? Where is their seat at this table? When and if room is made for them, how can they be adequately and evenly represented when they come from countless perspectives, experiences and backgrounds? (Do they need just one representative on a given multireligious council or do they need three, or ten, or fifty?) How can the rich experiences of such people be folded into this work responsibly, especially since their voices can provide much-needed critique to the religious project in general? And if they are at the table, how can multireligious coalitions avoid instrumentalizing *them*—that is, avoid turning them into only the much-needed critical voices who can call religious people to account? How can their unique experiences and perspectives be guarded, preserved and promoted as *themselves* “religiously” valid and important?

God is Not a Man (or a Woman): Why the Words We Use for God are Important

Kate Mroz, MTS 2013

Close your eyes for a second. I am going to describe someone to you, and I want you to picture that person in your mind. This is someone you never met. You have no clue what the person looks like. Ready? *He is kind. He is smart. He is strong. He is compassionate.* Now open your eyes. Who did you see? If you heard the masculine pronouns, then I can assume you pictured a male. Now, if I was describing an actual male-identified person above, then perhaps this not problematic. However, let's say I was describing God. The image of God is now associated with the image of a human male in your brain. This is why using exclusively male pronouns to portray God can be detrimental to one's spiritual practice, most especially to that of women, and why it is important to be conscious of the kind of language we use to describe God.

First of all, the continuous use of masculine language to talk about God distorts our perception of God. Not one of us, no matter how devoted we may be to our particular tradition or how much theology we have studied, can claim to comprehend God fully. What we can say is that God is beyond all human characteristics. God is transcendent. Whatever human words we use for God fall short of the Reality that is God. This includes the words male and female. God is not human. God does not have a gender. Assigning God a gender, actually denigrates God, demoting God to a human male, rather than a Divine Higher Power. Furthermore, when masculine terms for God become absolutized, not only does God become a male, but the male becomes God. This notion then implies that women are subordinate to men, and owe men obedience and submission. Eradication of this notion is crucial, especially considering that according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one out of every four women in the US is will experience domestic violence, and one out of every six women will be the victim of rape or attempted rape within her lifetime.

Second, exclusively masculine language implies that only men are made in God's image. According to Dr. Elizabeth Johnson, "such language robs women of the dignity that would accrue if the gracious reality of God were addressed in their own womanly image or likeness."¹ This is especially important considering that throughout history, women's bodies have been portrayed as sources of contamination, as causes of sin and shame. In Christianity, the Genesis story of Adam and Eve has been used to blame the fall of humanity on women. While many

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 99.

communities today claim to distance themselves from such sentiments, their effects are still being felt. Even today, where women are doctors, lawyers, professors, and Supreme Court Justices, many women are engaged in a constant battle of self-hatred with their bodies. Currently, women account for 91% of cosmetic procedures in the United States.² Over 80% of women are unhappy with their appearance.³ Women's bodies are not celebrated as sacred creations of the Divine, and are often the site of physical abuse or emotional ridicule by men, the media, and women themselves in an effort to change their appearance. Thus, it is necessary that we affirm that just as every man images God, so does every woman image God and she does so even on her own, not needing marriage to a man to become God-like. One way of affirming this is by not solely referring to God as "He." If we truly want to show that both male and female are made in the image of the divine, we need to voice this clearly in our conversations, research papers, and worship services.

I do want to point out that it breaks my heart when friends of mine, knowing that I study Women, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion at Harvard Divinity School, will use "He" to reference God, and then quickly apologize as if they have greatly offended me. It especially hurts me when people say "He," then suddenly cover their mouth and remark "Oops, I meant to say She!" Replacing masculine pronouns with feminine ones is not the goal. If we were to suddenly start referring to God solely as "She" and "Her," that would be demoting God to a human woman, which is just as problematic as demoting God to a human man.

Total elimination of gendered nouns for God need not be the goal. Gendered nouns can make a prayer more personal. Many persons desire a deep, intimate relationship with the divine. We often use gendered nouns to describe the people we love and are closest to in our lives. For example, I could not imagine calling my mother or my father "Parent." Terms like Mother, Dad, Ma, Pop, etc. are more endearing. Therefore, it is understandable that we may sometimes wish to refer to God as our loving Mother or our loving Father.

So, how do we discuss the divine without offending men or women? There is no simple or correct answer. Many times, one can easily just refer to God as God, and eliminate the need for pronouns. In academic speaking or writing, some may find that using the word God over and over again may make their work sound awkward or artificial. Something I have done in my undergraduate and graduate work is switch off pronouns, sometimes referring to God as "He" and other times using "She."

² YWCA, *Beauty at Any Cost* (August 2008)

³ Maggie Wilkes and Barrie Gunter, *The Media and Body Image* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005); 156.

When leading a prayer or holding a worship service, it is important to take the entire audience into account. What one calls God in one's own silent personal prayers may not be terms for which others in the community can relate. There are many wonderful names for God that are gender-neutral. God need not be God the Father, but can be Creator, Friend, Counselor, Healer, Maker of the Universe, Divine Mystery, among other names. Many times, the words of a song or a prayer can be changed without anyone even noticing. The type of God-language that should be used in public gatherings is a discussion that many communities should have with one another and a decision that should be made by many people, rather than one leader or presider. Furthermore, if one feels uncomfortable with the way a certain hymn is sung or the words of a certain prayer, one should speak up about this. Many times, exclusively masculine imagery is used out of habit, not out of malice. Some may argue that changing the words to songs or prayers is bothersome and awkward. Certainly change can feel peculiar at first. Nevertheless, the more gender-inclusive terms are employed today, the less strange they feel, and the sooner adopting gender-inclusive language becomes the norm, rather than the exception.

Of course, some members of a community may not want to give up the original words to a beloved hymn, or may at times feel that the use of a gendered noun is most appropriate to convey a particular message or feeling. If we are to keep some traditional masculine names for God, it is important to allow for the rediscovery of the feminine aspect of God found in religious traditions. In this regard, many Christian and Jewish women have turned to the tradition of Divine Wisdom or Sophia. Reference to Sophia is found throughout the Old and New Testaments. She is present at creation, playing in delight with the newborn world.⁴ She walks the paths of justice, and kings who rule righteously do so by her light.⁵ It is important that we do not fall into the trap of labeling certain actions of God as masculine or feminine. For example, only using Sophia to describe God as compassionate and nurturing, and only using God the Father to talk about God's power and might, serves to reinforce unjust gender stereotypes. Sophia is not a passive figure, a "goddess" subordinate to the one God, but rather is the one God, just called by a feminine name. To come closer to capturing the essence of God as transcendent mystery, it is vital to use a balance of masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral terms for God.

Gender exclusive language is not only found in religion, but in almost every sector of society today. "Mankind. Freshman. Mailman. Policeman. Congressman.

⁴ Proverbs 8:31

⁵ Proverbs 8:15

Man-made. All men are created equal.” Some will argue that surely women must know that these terms include them, especially here at Harvard where women preach, lecture, and learn alongside men. However, the progress women have made today does not take away from the fact that they deserve to have their full humanity affirmed in our choice of language. The inclusion of women is not a given and has not been throughout history. Women still earn less than men for the same amount of work. Women are still greatly underrepresented in the public realm. It was not that long ago that the admission and acceptance of women at Harvard Divinity School was a topic for debate. HDS was the second to last school at Harvard to admit women. In 1949, Dean Sperry defended the policy of keeping HDS an all-male school, writing as “one cannot wholly escape the ungenerous suspicion that many a young woman enters a divinity school with the unsuspected hope that she may become a minister’s wife rather than a minister on her own account.”⁶ So, we should not stand back and simply expect women to accept masculine language as normative, and as speaking for all of humanity.

While planning HDS’s orientation as one of the Orientation Coordinators, I became more conscious of the fact that something as simple as language can make a tremendous difference in how a message is received. One word can determine whether or not a person feels welcomed or excluded. I do not claim to possess an answer to the question of gender inclusive language that will satisfy all. The best I can do is give you my thoughts as an aspiring feminist theologian. All I ask is that in this upcoming academic year, we each give serious thought and consideration to the way we talk about God in the classroom, in worship services, and in our daily interactions with our colleagues. During my time at HDS, it meant a lot to me when the members of *N’Spire*, a musical group at HDS, took the time to have a discussion on gender inclusive language at some of its practices. We did not all agree with one another, but it meant a lot to everyone present that each voice was listened to and taken into account. So let us challenge ourselves to pay attention to the language we use and what it conveys to others. The more we are conscious of the words we choose, the less like our words will offend or exclude those around us. The more our colleagues feel welcomed, affirmed, and accepted, the richer our academic, spiritual, and social experience at Harvard will be.

⁶ G.H Williams, “Divinings: Religion at Harvard,” Volume 3 (Newton, MA: Boston Theological Institute, 2011), 182.

Comparative Theology: (A Possible?) Next Level of Interreligious Dialogue

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In this short piece I would like to proffer some musings I have had concerning the not so well known though ever burgeoning field of comparative theology as it relates to the practice of interreligious dialogue. I will begin with a short definition and description of the field of comparative theology and its relationship to other “comparative” and “theological” fields. Following that, a broad assessment of the general state of interreligious dialogue in the academic, public, and lay sphere will be put forward. I will then conclude with what I believe to be the benefits of bringing the methodology of comparative theology into the field of interreligious dialogue as a fruitful addition to the roundtable of dialogue. These thoughts come out of my experience studying the Islamic and Christian intellectual tradition as a comparative theologian-in-the-making, as well as my interreligious experiences in Morocco and Iran.⁷

At its basic level, comparative theology is simply any theology performed interreligiously. From a Christian perspective, it is theological because it operates to a certain extent within the confines of systematic, practical, or constructive Christian theology. While “theology” may be an exclusively Christian term, other religious traditions nevertheless have parallel fields whether or not they are called “theology” in their native language of discourse.⁸ Just as “theology” in the Christian tradition overlaps with philosophy, ethics, mysticism, cosmology, metaphysics, etc., so do intellectual discourses in other traditions overlap with the *objects of discourse* and various *genres* of Christian “theology” (at least at an abstract level). Furthermore, comparative theology is “comparative” because it is “the practice of rethinking some aspect or aspects of one’s own faith tradition through the study of some aspect or aspects of another faith tradition.”⁹ For example, one may seek to understand better the nature of “grace” in the Christian tradition in comparative theological dialogue with the nature of “mercy” in the Islamic tradition (and in both cases, these terms have been the subjects of a protracted list of treatises and commentaries that are not just theological, but perhaps metaphysical, cosmological, philosophical, and

⁷ See the blog posts at www.comparativetheology.org for more on these experiences.

⁸ Sometimes what is called “theology” does not even correspond to the Christian notion thereof, as the example of *kalām* in the Islamic tradition. Though it has been translated as “theology,” it actually deals with a small portion of the objects of discourse of Christian theology; the fields of *ʿirfān* or *hikma* are far more similar to Christian theology, in fact (at least when using objects of discourse and genre as the criteria to judge what is “theology” in non-Christian traditions, which is the best one can do).

⁹ From “Comparative Theology,” *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (2007), pp. 653-669, Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Parkman Professor of Divinity, Harvard Divinity School. For further information on comparative theology, see also *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, forthcoming 2010), *The New Comparative Theology: Voices from the New Generation*. Francis X. Clooney, SJ, Editor. (New York, London: Continuum Publishing, 2010), and www.comparativetheology.org

mystical).¹⁰ The possible candidates for interreligious learning include just about any object of discourse within the field of theology, broadly defined. It must be noted, however, that comparative theology is different on several levels from the field comparative religion and the history of religions. Simply put, comparative theology is inherently confessional, while these other fields presuppose objectivity and avoid confessional allegiance on the part of the researcher, thus eschewing evaluative judgments. Comparative theology, like theology, is more often than not *personal*, while comparative religion and other related study of religion fields remain objective in order to understand religion from a theoretical, social, cultural, and/or historical standpoint.

Interreligious dialogue is often characterized as roundtable discourse between adherents of two or more religious traditions wherein a subject is proposed and then discussed. While there are, of course, many positive results coming out of interreligious dialogue, I believe there are several problematic issues that need to be addressed:

Interreligious dialogue in the West – either before or after much frustration over fundamental disagreements on theology – is inevitably relegated to matters of social justice. While not diminishing the importance of the interreligious advancement of the common good, the problem with this is that matters of *real theology* are never breached. In other words, it is much easier to deliberate about ‘love thy neighbor’ than for a Muslim to come to understand how the Trinity and the Incarnation do not undermine absolute monotheism in Christian theology (or do they?).

While there are plenty of local, national and even international dialogue meetings, they tend to attract individuals for whom ‘dialogue-for-understanding’ is not necessary. In other words, it ends up being a “preaching-to-the-choir” scenario. Even when the above two are not the case, interreligious dialogue tends to be a venue in which adherents of one faith tradition simply learn about the customs, practices, and beliefs of another faith tradition. There is very little theological or spiritual growth in the knowledge and understanding of *one’s own faith tradition* or the other’s because complex issues of Truth are rarely discussed.

Thus in my opinion and out of my experiences, as far as interreligious dialogue is concerned, in order to come to an understanding of another faith tradition as well as one’s own, a theological engagement that does not eschew fundamental beliefs out of a sort of theological mawkishness is necessary; nor must

¹⁰ In addition, comparative theology is not simply a matter of imposing Christian terminology onto non-Christian traditions, evidenced by this example. The Christian theologian starts by attempting humbly to find the conceptual equivalent of grace in Islam (not just looking for the linguistic equivalent, such as *ni’mah*), and finds that “mercy” (*rahmān* or *rahīm*) may be a good candidate (at least in some circles of Islamic thought) that could inform the Christian concept of grace. After further research, however, it may prove not to be.

one reject other reflections of Truth that exist in another religious tradition (simply because it is seemingly and exoterically contrary to one's own tradition). Even though the Christian concepts of the Trinity and Incarnation, or religion without a codified *sharia* (law), may be a theological cacophony to the traditional Muslim of the Islamic world, it does not follow that a Christian must ignore these essential doctrines when engaging in dialogue; nor should a Christian ignore what Islam has to say about Truth simply because the Qur'an rejects the incarnation and Trinity in its own way.¹¹ On the contrary, fruitful results are only possible when we remain firmly rooted and loyal to one tradition, yet *open* and *vulnerable* to the theology of another.

That is precisely how comparative theology has been defined. A comparative theologian is firmly rooted in her own faith tradition yet vulnerable to the sacred wisdom of another faith tradition, seeking to learn about her own tradition by studying another. The field of comparative theology, in fact, has much to offer the field of interreligious dialogue. Whether or not the field of comparative theology is restricted to the scholarly or academic community, certainly its written products as well as its methodology (and most of all, a practitioner's disposition of *vulnerability*, a virtue when it comes to comparative theology) can be used within the discourse of interreligious dialogue. For example, rather than a group of Christians and Muslims discussing their respective theological understandings of Jesus, it might be more fruitful to discuss the Islamic understanding of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) and how the Biblical Jesus fits or does not fit the description of that cosmological being (and how Christian Christology can learn from that Islamic concept, and vice-versa).

As this example admits, comparative theology is certainly more nuanced than interreligious dialogue, and perhaps more difficult to put into practice. It is certainly much easier to compare the Islamic view of Mary and the Christian view of Mary than it is to look at (and "comparatively theologize") the more theological notion of being a "Word-Bearer" in Islam (the prophet Muhammad, *ṣall Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*) and of being the *Theotokos* in Christianity (Mary, the God-Bearer). Nevertheless, I maintain that the burgeoning field of comparative theology is required to push interreligious dialogue to the next level and toward a more vulnerable engagement of Truth and sacred wisdom; it will also push believers to

¹¹ It is worth noting that these concepts (Trinity, Incarnation, *sharia*, the Qur'anic rejection of the Trinity and the Incarnation, etc.) are themselves barely understood by Christians and Muslims themselves, and so at times it is simply easier to move past those issues in order to address less complex ones, such as the possibility of a prophet after Christ, the ways in which the Holy Spirit works in Islam, or social justice, etc. My point in bringing this up is that these concepts are themselves nuanced and highly involved (have you asked a Christian lately to explain the intricacies of the Trinity or Incarnation?), and I believe that bringing comparative theology into interreligious dialogue can help in understanding and explaining these theological concepts.

reflect *on their own faith tradition* as they compare it to another and explain it to the believers of a different one. Exactly how comparative theology will fit into interreligious dialogue has yet to be determined, since the former is still new and constantly evolving. However, it is my hope that comparative theology will slowly enter the discourse of interreligious dialogue, giving it new life and ideas, and new ways to understand the religious other (and self!), Truth, and sacred wisdom.

Communicating Across Borders
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A rich array of “diversity studies” as well as research on privilege and power has been developed in the past 40 years or so, but they have not yet fully found their way into the center of the HDS research profile and curriculum. Women/gender/ feminist studies, African, African American, Latin- and Meso-American, Queer or Postcolonial Studies in Religion are found at the borders and margins of the curriculum and are not yet central to the research and educational ethos of the academy. They are seen as important for wo/men, blacks, gay, disabled or foreign students but not for white straight American men.ⁱ They are often discussed as perspectival opinions but not as serious scholarship which is still defined as universal i.e. Euro-American.

Feminist theorists have amply documented that the malestream Eurocentric paradigm of knowledge separates reason from emotion and experience in order to produce detached, value-neutral, impartial knowledge.ⁱⁱ The classic articulation of this scientific ethos stems from Max Weber. In a famous speech before students in 1909, Weber argued that one must distinguish between empirical statements and value judgments that cohere with a certain ethical or religious system. In his view, professors should only teach knowledge of the first kind in order not to proselytize by virtue of their authority for their own value system. Consequently, students are not taught how to reflect on their contexts, assumptions and values or to discuss with each other the values they consider most important. Instead, they tend to retreat either into a doctrinal absolutism which does not allow for different viewpoints or to seek refuge in liberal relativism that makes it possible to avoid serious engagement with differences. Thereby the scholarly ethos maintains the reigning scientist paradigm of knowledge that does not encourage exploration of one’s experience and values or the socio-political – cultural context and construction of knowledge

To replace this value-detached model of knowing, feminist political philosophers and the*logiansⁱⁱⁱ have suggested that we conceptualize the academy or the church as a democratic public,^{iv} a polity understood as a group of people “who live together, who are stuck with each other,”^v or an ekklesia i.e. as an assembly of citizens with full rights and responsibilities.^{vi} A feminist model of knowing sees experience as a primary resource for knowledge and introduces wo/men as active agents in the creation of knowledge. It insists that the progress of a society depends on the progress of its wo/men^{vii} or to variegate this dictum: that the justness of a religion depends on the position it accords to wo/men.

Studying at HDS means to negotiate many borders: the borders enacted by heteronormativity, wealth, race, class, education, gender, coloniality, culture,

corporality, denomination, religion and many more. It means to respect personal, cultural, political and religious borders while at the same time seeking to transcend them toward a deeper understanding and communication with the other.^{viii}

If one envisions Harvard Divinity School as a communicative, democratic polity, one can see differences in religious position and cultural identity perspective as a resource rather than as something to be overcome. Yet, dialogue partners need to remain aware that they do not completely comprehend the different perspectives and religious positions of the others which must not be assimilated into one's own. Moreover, difference is never total; it does not exclude commonalities, reciprocity, and similarities. Communication among perspectives that transcend each other can achieve mutual understanding only if they do not aim at total identification or co-optation but seek for respect and celebration of the different other.

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue requires that one actively engages the differences of religious meanings, belief-systems, perspectives, and positions. It means encountering each other with the awareness and affirmation of such differences, rather than looking for the lowest common denominator or romanticizing the other by denying the self. It entails equal respect for one another, the right to express one's own point of view, and the right to be heard. Finally, it requires the formulation of an agreement on procedural rules for discussion and decision making. For such a speaking across differences and identity borders, I suggest the following ground rules:

Begin with experience. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue has to begin with experience. In order to respect each other, we have to get to know each other. We need to share our stories and articulate our assumptions and perspectives. Such sharing of experiences requires careful listening, support, and respect for the divine image of wisdom/Wisdom in each of us. It requires us to recognize and appreciate one another in our particularities. We seek to know and appreciate the unique distinctiveness of every dialogue partner in order to communicate across boundaries. Become aware of your own socio-political and religious-the*logical location and socialization. If what we see depends on where we stand, then it is important to pinpoint our class, race and gender socialization, cultural and ethnic education, as well as identify our religious affiliations and the*logical commitments. Many misunderstandings can be avoided if we become conscious that our dearly held convictions express not so much religious differences, but cultural-political or the*logical-ideological disagreements. Communicating across differences requires bringing disagreements to the fore, making them audible so that they can be discussed, instead of attempting to erase the traces of power over and exclusion that turn difference into division.

Analyze power relations and systems of domination and name them the*logically as structural sin or cultural-political injustice. Differences are not always positive but they often represent unequal power relations, which are socio-politically

and historically rooted. They can turn out to be prejudices and divisions created by racism, hetero-sexism, classism, colonialism, and dogmatic orthodoxy which denounces as heretics all those who are different. Feminist and liberation theologians call such discursive manifestations of domination and marginalization "structural sin." Such a concept of sin allows us to acknowledge century old prejudices against each other and at the same time to repent and take responsibility for changing them. No one is innocent; we all are more or less immersed in and have internalized dehumanizing religious-cultural belief-systems of domination. Not apologetics and liberal pluralism but the acknowledgment of such structural sin is called for.

Affirm your identity and acknowledge who you are. The fear to discover one's own racism, religious bigotry, or cultural sexism is often neutralized, averted, and rationalized through a particularly fierce critique of the prejudices of others. In Harvard's traditional atmosphere of intellectual competition engendering feelings of inadequacy, to learn to admit our own feelings of inadequacy and prejudice would be the first step for overcoming this system of alienation. Otherwise we will continue to produce stereotypes and proliferate the belligerent violent forms of kyriarchal society and religion. As the Jewish philosopher and theologian Eveline Goodman-Thau used to say to her German students: "I want to make good Christians out of you so that you can leave Jews alone because you recognize and respect us as deeply ethical and religious human beings."

Real dialogue is only possible between equals. Equality, however, does not mean sameness but equal standing and equivalence of dignity. It means to respect and acknowledge different religions and cultures as of the same value and of equal importance as one's own. Because of an exclusivist orthodox christology which is already inscribed in the New Testament, Christians for instance are inclined to assert their religious superiority if they are not able to define their self-identity in an inclusive rather than an exclusive fashion. Hence it is important that we learn to reformulate our belief-systems in such a fashion that they do not exclude the others but acknowledge them as equals.

Increase your knowledge about the others. Many prejudices and much offensive behavior are due to ignorance. However, ignorance is not an excuse—especially not for those engaged in religious and theological studies. If we would understand the study of other religions not as an objectivist, value-neutral science but as a public enterprise, as "the getting to know each other" of peoples who have to live together, as an active communicative engagement with their religious vision and ethic, then HDS could truly become a center of intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

Look for and create the "common ground" of solidarity for articulating shared visions and theological revisions. In a global situation of venture capitalism, rampant poverty, and dehumanizing bigotry, all religious persons are challenged today to articulate and realize a liberating, spiritual vision of justice and well-being

for everyone. In such a situation we need to learn how to weave together the heterogeneous strands of the emancipatory traditions of the world's religions into the multicolored tapestry of common but different ethical-religious spiritual visions. Religious people are called to rediscover and affirm spiritual traditions of human dignity, justice, inclusivity, diversity, and the richness of creation. Otherwise, the post-colonial moment that demands the transformation of Eurocentric cultural canons, North American political hegemony, and western Christian supremacy, is in danger of being subverted again by the forces of prejudice. Such forces are not only the neoliberal processes of economic and cultural colonization, ethnic cleansing, and divisive balkanization, but also religious fundamentalist exclusivism.^{ix}

In attempting to find resources and criteria for such a radical democratic spiritual vision, our hermeneutical lens must remain focused on the struggles of wo/men at the bottom of the global kyriarchal pyramid of exploitation. In order to speak to our capitalist postmodern situation that questions all universal claims to justice and liberation, our intellectual community at HDS needs to model how to recognize and affirm that we all are in the same fragile global "life boat" called earth for which we all are responsible.

ⁱ William M. Timpson, Silvia Sara Canette, Evelinn Borrayo, Raymond Yang, eds. *Teaching Diversity. Challenges and Complexities, Identities and Integrity* (Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing, 2003).

ⁱⁱ For further discussion and documentation see my book *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992

ⁱⁱⁱ Since theology (GK theos) is masculine defined and thealogy (Gk thea) also would inscribe gender, although the Divine transcends gender, I write the*logy in this fashion to alert readers to the problem.

^{iv} For example, see my book: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies. Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

^v Iris Marion Young, "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy," in Seyla Benhabib, Ed., *Democracy and Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pg. 126.

^{vi} Since democratic citizenship has been developed by and for men it is necessary to qualify ekklesia with wo/men in order to indicate such a radical democratic vision.

^{vii} I use wo/men as inclusive of men, so that men like wo/men have to learn to "think twice" and to ask whether they are meant or not when I write wo/men.

^{viii} See Lynn Weber, *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2010).

^{ix} For a discussion of different religious fundamentalisms see the contributions in John Stratton Hawley, *Fundamentalism & Gender*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. For a discussion of how they have developed and are inspiring the "war on wo/men" see Nancy L. Cohen, *Delirium. How the Sexual Counterrevolution is Polarizing America. A Groundbreaking Investigation into the Shadow Movement that Fuels our Political Wars* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012).