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An Intercultural Imperative

In the various contexts in which we teach, it is well known that religious studies and theology faculty are confronted with multiple challenges, no matter what our setting might be — whether at a small liberal arts college, a large state university, a midsize private university, a university divinity school, or a freestanding seminary.

One aspect of the challenges we face as we continue to move through the ongoing economic doldrums and related social agendas includes reduced budgets or perhaps even the threat of elimination of positions and programs. Moreover, some of our colleagues contend with not only the continuing demand to justify the value of a liberal arts education, but also the added burden of explaining the general purpose of religious studies and theological studies in the context of liberal arts and humanities. For those scholar-teachers at divinity schools and theological seminaries, the value of religious studies and theological studies is still safely assumed, so far, but the need for and viability of certain other disciplines and fields has been brought into question. Trustees and administrators are asking whether a school or department can really afford the “luxury” of a sociologist of religion or a scholar of religion and culture, of having both a theologian *and* an ethicist, or even a Hebrew Bible scholar and a Christian Testament scholar, in the same department.

In addition to the economic challenges, we are in the midst of a massive demographic shift in society that unfortunately has only had episodic impact on the nature, shape, and enrollment of higher education, including religious studies. As our societies become increasingly more diverse and multicultural through the transnational movement of peoples and ideas, there is the potential for greater diversity and cross-cultural exchange in our schools and departments. Indeed, some of our institutions are already experiencing this change, whereas others are wondering how to even begin to engage the new realities and intercultural possibilities.

In the face of such challenges, as well as others not articulated here, I think that there is benefit in embracing pedagogical strategies that include intercultural ways of learning and teaching. Daniel Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools of the United States and Canada, once observed that there is a need for “an understanding of theological education that serves an even broader range of ministry settings — full- and part-time leaders, leaders who are as likely to be noncongregation-based as they are based in congregations, persons preparing for ministry, and persons already in ministry.” ([6](#)) While he was specific to theological education, I think that Aleshire’s remarks point to a wider concern — namely, that as scholar-teachers of religious studies, the education we provide to our students must serve a changing population with increasingly diverse expectations of that education and that our students, as graduates, later move into contexts not anticipated even a few years ago. It is a challenge to discern how to educate for a broad population in a context where not everyone recognizes the dramatic shifts that already have occurred and where any attempt to take action in response is perceived as an assault on what has been “tried and true” and/or a departure from some concept of a core mission, whether of a department or school.

I am not arguing that we must jettison the current dominant structure of degree programs, in

part because I do not think that they are going to disappear. More importantly, higher education in the broad fields of religious studies ought not to be held hostage to a limited understanding of education, whether that takes the form of teaching for an external exam, meeting shifting, arbitrarily imposed standards, or embracing a nostalgic social, cultural, and pedagogical past that hides its opposition to contextual innovation. The changing context calls for a diversity of educational strategies that recognizes the changing student body, the multiple reasons people pursue higher education, and their varied vocational goals beyond our own specific learning objectives of a course.

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