

Loye Ashton, Tougaloo College, and Devorah Schoenfeld, Loyola University, Chicago



Loye Ashton is associate professor of religious studies at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi. He is the chair of the Interdisciplinary Humanities department and director of the religious studies program, a member of the Honors Program Faculty, as well as a biomedical research ethicist in the Educational Training Program of the Jackson Heart Study. He has been a member of the American Academy of Religion since 1993 and a member of the North American Paul Tillich Society since 2004, where he recently served as president (2008). In 2009 he was accepted into the American Academy of Religion/Luce Foundation research seminar on Comparative Theology and Theologies of Religious Pluralism. In addition to numerous papers delivered at academic conferences, Ashton has recently had three theological commentaries (for Propers 16–18) published in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Lectionary Commentary Series, Year B, Volumes 3 and 4 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). He is also currently working on two book-length projects, Faithful Uncertainty: Introducing Contemporary Theology (Westminster John Knox Press) and a current manuscript project about the sources of the opposition to the Gülen/Hizmet interfaith peace movement in Turkey. An avid student of world percussion for over thirty years, he is also a contributing blogger to the website www.rockandtheology.com

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Devorah Schoenfeld is in her first year as assistant professor of Judaism (theology) at Loyola University, Chicago. She previously taught for three years at Saint Mary's College of Maryland and for two years at the University of California, Davis. Schoenfeld's research is on medieval Bible commentaries and the history of Jewish–Christian relations, and she has a forthcoming book comparing medieval Jewish and Christian Bible commentaries on the near-sacrifice of Isaac. In 2009, Schoenfeld was accepted into the American Academy of Religion/Luce Foundation research seminar on Comparative Theology and Theologies of Religious Pluralism.

Devorah Schoenfeld



In the summers of 2009 and 2010 I took part in the Summer Seminar on Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology that was sponsored by the American Academy of Religion and the Luce Foundation. During this seminar I had the opportunity to discuss with Loye Ashton some of the more fraught and complicated ethical questions that come up in the course of my work. How do we ethically represent a minority religion to students who might have no prior experience with it? How do I balance the need to make my tradition accessible to my students while at the same time responsibly representing the tradition authentically? Should I disclose my own place within my religion or should I represent all varieties of my religion as if they are my own? How should I discuss violence perpetrated in the name of my religion? What are my ethical responsibilities to the community that I am representing? Or to the community to which the majority of my students belong? These questions have been on my mind since, although my answers at this point are still tentative.

Loye Ashton



Over the past two years, I have had both the pleasure and honor of working with Devorah Schoenfeld in the Luce/AAR Summer Seminar Program in Comparative Theology/Theologies of Religious Pluralism project as part of the same Cohort of scholars who were given the generous opportunity to learn more about this emerging field directly from key scholars and academic pioneers. The ethical questions that she raised above resonated with me as well. We would discuss in small-group breakout sessions the challenges of trying not only to translate comparative theology and the task of theologizing about religious pluralism into the language and culture of our home departments and institutions, but also to think about ourselves as religious people who are doing the teaching — and yet who are also scholars of religion in academic settings that are themselves both objectively and subjectively religious in their

historical affiliations with religious communities. Add to that as well then the next level of diverse student (and faculty) compositions that cut across different religious identities. The complications of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle as applied to the task of teaching theology and religious studies when so many levels of religious meaning and identity overlap began to make themselves apparent to us and to press upon us the need to think more reflectively about the ethical issues that arise from such interweavings of position and examination.

Devorah Schoenfeld



As a Jewish studies professor teaching at a Catholic university I have ethical responsibilities to my students, to the Jewish community, and to my employers in the Jesuit order and the Catholic Church. The last one is, for a Jew, possibly the most laden and complicated, and yet I am convinced it is quite important. As a professor at a Catholic university I am a fellow traveler with the Catholic church; I am implicated in the future of the Catholic church and I also bear some responsibility for helping to shape this future. At a minimum, I need to be willing to work for its continued survival and growth.

Since the majority of my students are Catholic — many of whom have very little background in their own religious tradition — I have some responsibility to help them develop as Catholic theologians. That is, it is my responsibility to help them develop their theological thinking while not asking them to change their beliefs.

The Jewish/Christian relationship is complicated and difficult. It also goes back to the beginnings of Christianity (and, for that matter, to the beginnings of Judaism as a diaspora religion). To truly know who you are is to know what you are in relationship, and I consider that to be as true for a community as it is for an individual. It is an act of profound courage for a Catholic institution to hire a Jewish studies professor because it is part of my business to remind them of their history, and not always the most pleasant parts. I can only do this if I am prepared to believe in the potential of the church as a force for good in the world.

Related to this is the responsibility that I have to the Jewish community. When I explain my work to Jewish people outside the university, I sometimes say that my goal is to prevent the next generation of anti-Semitism. The most important thing that I do, I think, to meet this responsibility is to represent sympathetically the diversity of approaches within Judaism. This includes secular cultural Judaism and various Jewish attitudes towards Israel. There is a

temptation to represent more sympathetically approaches with which I agree, or approaches with which my students are likely to agree, but since I am the only Jew some of my students are likely to meet, I owe it to my Jewish community to present all parts of it sympathetically. I do not disclose my own denomination or where I stand on any issues within the Jewish community. I have also taken steps to make it difficult for students to find this out by “Googling” me. I also make a point of maintaining relationships with multiple synagogues of different denominations. I do this for two reasons. First, I want to be able to authentically represent multiple forms of Judaism to my students. Second, I don’t want my students to have an easy way out from understanding the diversity of Judaism today.

At this point I still have more questions than answers. The work of teaching across religious difference seems to me to be full of fraught ethical questions, and yet I remain convinced that this work is important.

Loye Ashton



In my place of location, I am a practicing Christian — United Methodist to be specific — teaching religious studies and theology at a small church-related liberal arts college in Jackson, Mississippi. Furthermore, I am a male of European ancestry raised in the American Northwest teaching at a deeply Southern HBCU whose student enrollment is almost entirely African-American with a majority being female. I hold both a PhD in religious studies and theology as well as a call to ordained ministry in the religious community in which I serve. In my case however, most of my students self-identify as Christian so I would not describe myself as teaching across religious traditions per se so much as trying to teach about religious traditions other than one’s own in an environment that too often doesn’t even respect theological diversity within the religious communities that comprise historical Christianity. Some of the most pressing ethical issues that I have experienced involve the power relationships that arise when I as the instructor present material that challenges students’ sense of what constitutes “right” faith in a religiously plural world that students acknowledge at a practical level (economically, artistically, politically) but also distrust and resist at a deeper religious level. In other words, “other” ways of being religious threaten the social order of how to define the narrow gate. If “other” people can get to Heaven from “there,” then how do we keep it all in place over “here”? The impassioned message from the pulpits of their childhoods warns them against such corrosive suggestions from non-Southern outsiders like myself.

Teaching across such social and power imbalances makes the ethical responsibility of attending

and listening to the fears and hopes of my students even more imperative: my position in authority (in both the academic and ecclesial senses) makes the invitation I give in the classroom to explore the wider globalized world of theological comparison across religious plurality an exciting alternative to their cultural upbringing — even while it unsettles and rattles their own inner sense of what they have always believed to be true regarding the will of God. Such work for me is simultaneously frustrating and rewarding beyond measure. But I also try to be mindful never to take it for granted that it is some of the most difficult work they have ever been asked to do with respect to the educational mission of developing their ability to think critically in the liberal arts. In this work lie buried the ethical minefields of power and authority and their misuse, even by well-intentioned clergy-scholars like myself who are often unconsciously toiling in these fields for intellectual conversions in the name of a postmodern project of a deconstructed enlightenment. Is this work I believe I am doing — to open the minds and hearts to the larger world of religiously human realities — simply another instantiation of neo-Colonial paternalism, or is it indeed the necessity of theological knowledge in our time and place?