

Interfaith Formation for Religious Leaders in a Multifaith Society: Between Meta-Spiritualities and Strong Religious Profiles

Tabitha Walther

Religious leaders today need new skills to meet the religiously pluralistic societies in which they serve. The aim of this essay is to explore this pluralistic challenge and find approaches that would effectively educate religious leaders for the multireligious context in which they will serve as religious professionals.

Cultural and religious diversity is not new. What is new is that this pluralism is experienced by every citizen and not just by cultural or religious minorities. Western societies have been pluralized. Migration and globalization have hastened this process of pluralization in ways previously unknown. Religious leaders for today and tomorrow need to develop tools to serve effectively in a multireligious context. They will not just minister to their own people, but beyond their own faith traditions, in between them, and within multiple religious traditions. This is true for a religious community that is multi-religious at its boundaries, as well as for public institutions with multi-religious populations, such as prisons, hospitals, schools, and universities.

Tabitha Walther, LTheol, lecturer and trained hospital chaplain, Faculty of Theology, The University of Basel, Missionstrasse 17a, 4055 Basel, Switzerland (E-mail: Tabitha.Walther@unibas.ch).

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

Religious pluralism knows many manifestations and is known in all religious traditions. People who are grounded in multiple religious traditions, in New Age thought, or people who combine teachings from various religious traditions, ask for spiritual support at critical life moments. The same is true for an ever-growing number of people who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” people who believe without belonging to a religious community, people who search for meaning in their lives without reference to transcendence. Families today also have complex religious profiles as a result of interreligious marriages or because one partner in a relationship is devoutly religious and the other is not. The particularity of religious convictions can be used to exclude radically.

The interfaith challenge for religious leaders lies partly in the multiple religious identity of the individual who seeks spiritual care. This religious pluralism is an important aspect of how the religious field has changed in Western societies since Pietism and Enlightenment and more radically in the decades since World War II. Institutional religion has been replaced by individual spirituality for many people. This speaks to the pluralism within religion. In addition, the closeness and exposure to people of other religions has led to an increase in religious conversions, multiple religious identities, patchwork religiousness, and stronger interreligious inclusiveness and exclusiveness. At the same time, the non-religious are a rapidly growing, though not an organized factor in society.

It is clear that new approaches to leadership formation are necessary for this complex religious field. There are two alternatives: (a) educate the religious leader towards a meta-spirituality, leaving behind “out of date” truth claims or (b) foster respectful engagement with the religiously different from a confessional ground.

WORLD RELIGIONS AS AN ATRIUM FOR A META-SPIRITUALITY

In many newer religious and theological concepts (Ken Wilber, for example) and even more in individual beliefs among North Americans, religions of the world become the atrium for a meta-spirituality. This metaspirtuality is on top of specific, culturally grounded world religions. Being attached to a specific religion becomes a stage of spiritual growth that may lead to a universal spirituality, free from exclusive truth claims and institutional attachment. This perspective is not new. It was and is particularly popular among some mystical traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity and now is found in some

strands of the pluralistic theologies of religion, such as the religious-philosophical theology of John Hick. As people walk through the developmental stages of faith (Fowler) or stages of consciousness (Wilber), they are formed spiritually, reaching eventually a spirituality that includes the whole cosmos. Only the spiritually gifted are likely to reach these last stages of consciousness.

This is a useful position for interfaith ministers because it lets them move smoothly through the pluralistic religious field of our time. It is, however, somewhat elitist and excludes the average religiously oriented person. A meta-spiritual concept also has the ugly potential to become a worldview that excludes others. Even so, the development of a universal spirituality remains a valuable goal in a pluralistic society. It is my observation that the U.S. American context has lived and still lives segregated in terms of religions, denominations, and race. In that context, the popularity of meta-spirituality is an understandable way to accent the commonalities among religious traditions despite ongoing separation. One should not assume, however, that all participants of world religions will soon participate in the same meta-religious spiritual experience and let go of particular religious truth claims.

A universal spirituality can be developed—as described by James Fowler—by growing deeper into one’s own religion, including a critical understanding of the dark sides in its past and present. Only then is it possible to practice a universal spirituality, grounded in a particular religious tradition, like the mystic leaders in the different religious traditions. Again, this goal is not for everyone.

The meta-spiritual concept is not held by the mainstream of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Perhaps the central problem with the concept of a meta-spirituality, so widely popular in the United States, is that the formation of a universal meta-spirituality does not work though the concrete conflicts of pluralism of past and present but rather enters too quickly into a universal spirituality before recognizing the conflicting worldviews in a pluralistic society. It does not address the problem that pluralism poses to a globalized society and its religious leaders: how do we deal constructively with the differing opinions, convictions, and worldviews in a pluralistic social context? Although some interfaith chaplains affirm this universal meta-spirituality, most have deep roots in one or more religious traditions.

CONFESSIONAL RELIGIOUS FORMATION AS THE GROUND FROM WHICH TO RESPECTFULLY ENGAGE RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE

Religious education usually happens in three contexts: in families, in the public sphere, and in religious communities. Clergy and chaplains are most

likely shaped by the religious context in which they were raised, educated, and now serve. The advantage of a confessional rooting is both the critical potential of the community support of the spiritual individual and the necessary critique of the individual toward the religious community.

The meta-spiritual worldview has not become popular in academic discussions in Europe nor in mainline church leadership. Instead, the mystical traditions within world religions, kept alive in the monastic traditions, have had a revival and are regularly used for developing a deepening spirituality, respectful and valuing of other traditions. The problem for the interfaith religious leader who is rooted in a specific religious tradition is that the truth claims of her or his tradition may be used to exclude people from "salvation" or "enlightenment."

Engaging pluralism does not mean "making the other like me" through a cosmic concept harmonizing the world religions into one spiritual truth. It is possible to engage religious difference by accepting of the "Otherness of the stranger," not because one has made her a part of one's own identity, but because one holds a deep respect for her convictions which differ from one's own. The ancient Hebrew tradition of the prophetic writings as preserved in the Jewish Bible reminds the tribal society of its time to give special shelter and protection to the *gojim*, the stranger, the non-Jew and the underprivileged. The prophetic tradition acknowledges the special needs of the stranger through special responsibility towards the one of "other belonging."

AN "INTERFAITH DOGMA" FOR RELIGIOUS PRACTITIONERS

To engage religious difference by accepting of the Otherness of the stranger and offering deep respect for convictions which differ from one's own is the dogma that I would like to offer for interfaith formation. I happily use the word "dogma" to point to the fact that there is no neutral perspective without norms and values, even if it is a comparative one, standing on the ground of religious studies rather than theology or philosophy. To engage religious difference, one needs at least the strength to accept, respect, and tolerate an individual of other religion, other religiosity, other spirituality, other worldview. This "interfaith dogma" is wide enough to include both the meta-spiritual person and the devoutly religious person rooted in a particular tradition, the philosophical non-believer and the person with diverse religious practices and a free floating spirituality. I have come to this conclusion through empirical research with interfaith chaplains in health

care institutions and personal interfaith practice as a chaplain at hospitals in Switzerland and California.

When groups in clinical pastoral education and Association for Clinical Pastoral Education supervisors learn and teach in an interreligious or at least religiously plural context, they naturally form people for interfaith ministry in one of two ways: some supervisors will focus on a universal spirituality or a meta-spiritual concept, while others seek to strengthen the religious profile of a student and make it respectful and productive for their ministry to people of other faith traditions. This means simultaneously exploring sameness and otherness. Chaplain supervisors will set boundaries in interfaith or multi-faith educational context according to their religious/ethical standards. They will work from a more situational than principled ministry approach—ministry as a profession that has developed the art of reflected technique and practice, responsive to the individual needs of the situation.

Rather than promoting a worldview, pastoral and spiritual supervision and care still function best with a client-centered approach, evolving around the living human document rather than the caregiver's ideology. Interfaith skills can be learned in the traditional structures of clinical pastoral education if the learning takes place in an intercultural and interreligious environment that is aware of the dominant religious traditions in the context. Clinical pastoral education is sustained by exploring one religious tradition and its implications for ministry to people outside that faith community. This includes knowledge and experience of other dominant religious traditions. Openness to others includes openness to conservative religious groups as well as to pluralistically open ones. The empirical research I have undertaken in California and Switzerland shows the openness of the confessional chaplain to people of other convictions.³ From my observations, I have concluded that the pastoral challenge is primarily intra-Christian (and perhaps also intra-Jewish and intra-Muslim)—between liberal and conservative, charismatic and liturgical. And only the second challenge is the inter-religious. There the specific challenges are the strangeness of the other and the struggle with the predominantly exclusive salvation concepts in the history of the Abrahamic traditions.

Every approach to formation, including CPE, holds both traditional and new "dogma" supervisory convictions that form worldviews and methodologies and inform practices. These convictions are to be respected rather than evaporated. At the same time, these fundamental convictions need to be reflected on and systematically brought into dialogue with the conse-

quent convictions toward people of other religious belongings and other convictions. I can only imagine the stress of a conservative Christian, a devout Muslim, a liberal Protestant, an ultra-orthodox Jew, or even a fundamentalist New Thought spiritualist working with someone who—under their assumptions—has not experienced the “right” or “mature” spiritual path yet.

As a hospital minister and a university teacher, one of my goals is to strengthen the congruent, reflected, and healthy convictions of another person—although they might not be mine—and learn to accept that, although humankind lives in one world and out of one divine spirit, humans are very particular and by no means participate in one worldview. This is good and not a threat because it holds important critical potential for all involved in practice and theory building. Differing values need to be discussed respectfully. It might mean we have to find good and convincing arguments for our values, our perspective, communicate with the strange other, learn from it, get to know each other, compromise here and there, dismiss unwise convictions of ourselves or our religious community, and support the religious integrity of the Other and ourselves. The crucial ideological question in the global multi-religious context might very well be how the religious leader values both religious pluralism and religious fundamentalism. Stereotypes about other denominations and other religions prove the deficient interfaith education of our pluralistic societies every single day—in classrooms, in political discussions, in the media, from pulpits.

I see interfaith ministry formation as one way to educate religious leaders of different traditions how to live together, how to serve each other, how to learn from each other, how to defend the rights of one another, and how to set boundaries on religious misbehavior informed by unhealthy ideologies which will again inform religious leaders and others in their religiously grounded ethics and practices.

The Swiss context illustrates the challenges ahead. The Swiss religious field is dominated by the two mainline churches: Protestant and Roman Catholic. In the city of Basel, for example, they are the only religious communities to serve as interfaith ministers in hospitals, prisons, and schools. Jewish rabbis and Jewish volunteers see their own people but do not work interfaith. The same is true for the Christ Catholic and the Methodist Church. Muslim spiritual care is not yet institutionalized. In that respect, the Swiss challenge is twofold: How can the mainline churches develop interfaith formation for their own clergy, and how can they create new institu-

tional and educational formation possibilities for clergy, chaplains, and lay persons from outside their own religious traditions?

There are three criteria for good interfaith formation in addition to general pastoral formation:

- Know the religious field in which the chaplain serves and know the pluralistic manifestations of modern spirituality—within and outside your own religion
- Reflect on your own truth claims and the implications for those for differing religions, worldviews, and individualized spiritualities
- Understand the Otherness of a person in their religious, cultural, spiritual, semantic, and generational aspects.

The interfaith chaplain or supervisor goes through a constant process of carefully perceiving and observing the religious reality of others and themselves. She reflects theologically, evaluates the value of these experienced realities, and, from there, acts professionally from within her own convictions, her religious community, and her public responsibility to give expression for the special care and need for the stranger. This is reflective practice at its best. I find this an exciting prospect and look forward to a next generation that will move through our pluralistic struggles much more elegantly and naturally than we have so far.

NOTES

1. I would like to point to an exception to that rule by a popular and controversial practical theologian from Germany who critically includes esoteric notions into his thinking: Manfred Josuttis, *Kraft durch Glauben: Biblische, Therapeutische und Esoterische Impulse für die Seelsorge* (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008), to be translated into English as *Energy through Faith: Biblical, Therapeutic, and Esoteric Impulses for Pastoral Care*.

2. For an exploration of how CPE forms interfaith chaplains, see Tabitha Walther, "Interfaith Chaplaincy: Pastoral Care for all Religions and all Faiths—A New Perspective for Clinical Pastoral Care in 21st Century Western Europe?" in Wilhelm Gräß and Lars Charbonnier, eds., "Secularization Theories: Religious Identity and Practical Theology, Proceedings of the International Academy of Practical Theology," Berlin, Germany, March 30–April 4, 2007, *International Practical Theology* 7, (2007): 416–423. For reflection on interfaith health care chaplaincy in various contexts, see Daniel Schipani, Leah Dawn Bueckert, eds., *Interfaith Spiritual Care: Understandings and Practices* (Kitchener, Ontario, Canada: Pandora Press, 2009).

3. This empirical data are not published yet but will be in the near future.