Welcome to Theology as a Second Language! If you are working with an interfaith group, you know it is both delightful and disturbing. So few things are givens! Do you want to have a snack or a meal together? You have to find out what dietary laws are observed by members and guests. Do you want to pray together? You have to agree on ground rules for styles, language, setting, leadership, and more. Do you want to engage in service work together? You have to figure out which groups are engaged on which issues and how deeply. Do you want to have a study group? Is childcare required or considered an affront? Can men and women be together? What are the sacred times you must avoid in scheduling? Do communities participate informally or do they designate spokespeople? Do you want to invite people to services in different communities? What dress is required? What practices must an outsider observe and which must an outsider avoid at all costs? When you add in the complications of dealing with different cultures as well as religions and spiritualities, it goes on and on and on...

I minister in a small Unitarian Universalist congregation with great diversity in religious backgrounds and spiritual practice. We are all religiously liberal and committed to the ideal of the Free Church. We aren't particularly demonstrative people and for a long time we tended to embrace a tacit agreement, "As long as it doesn't hurt anyone..." When I began this adventure, my intention was merely to assemble some tools to help our Congregation become more literate about each other's spiritual practices and traditions and more theologically adept. As I conceived it, our own practices and traditions would be our first language. Then we would learn theology together as a second language and using theological categories would afford us some fluency even if we couldn't be fully immersed in each other's Tradition. I envisioned a very modest project--and then we would go on to other things. Things changed. The work grew.

The schema we use to put this work into perspective is very simple:

EXPERT- One who knows one's self, religious roots, and personal theology very well and has the language to describe these coherently. In our Congregation, this is a goal for all members.

MENTOR- One who has skills to engage newcomers, non-members, and long-time visitors in exploring their theological terrain in non-threatening ways. In other words, one who is able to do theological reflection with others using the *other's* terms fostering genuine understanding even in great difference.

AMBASSADOR- One who is willing to represent us outside our Congregational setting, is familiar with issues of interfaith dialog, and has skills to facilitate dialog in *small* ways.

This curriculum was and still is intended primarily to help in the formation of Mentors and to encourage some of them to go further in their study and become Ambassadors. I feel obliged to spell this out:

It's about skills in articulating our own theology.
It's about skills in listening.
It's about skills in thoughtful questioning.
AND it's about learning more about other Traditions.

It's all about our attitudes and the ways we talk to and about each other and our Traditions--not just information.

This curriculum is already a third edition. We piloted a very modest first edition as part of my Doctor of Ministry program. It was done in six months and included small group training, large group religious education, Sunday sermons, an all-day retreat open to the public, and before and after questionnaires with participants at all levels. We focused on engaging Traditions with a significant representation in our Congregation.

We expanded the pilot edition into an in-house certificate program as a second edition. A pilot group of six members completed a year of formation together using it. They were commissioned as Spiritual Mentors (peer companions) for the Congregation. Our goal was to train a cadre of members with basic skills in theological reflection to offer seekers on their spiritual path, to assist visitors in understanding our Unitarian Universalist practice, to engage new members in assimilating to this Congregation, and to generally assist members in exploration of occasional troublesome issues. They were trained as a cohort so as to create a mentoring community of different spiritualities and traditions. It was a powerful experience for all of us. After that year, we began adding more modules to learn about the communities with which we partner--not just the traditions represented in our Congregation.

As we learned about the things that really mattered to each other instead of simply asking members to gloss differences, we moved from a simple stance of, "Live-and-let-live," to a more informed and compassionate, "How can we help each other live well?" As we became more aware of the beauty and breadth of the issues, even in our own group, it was obvious we also had an opportunity to serve the larger community in which we lived and perhaps even elsewhere. As I personally studied beyond the original work we did, I have found research demonstrating that the values and virtues that we need to cultivate in order to thrive as religious organizations, are the same values and virtues that open us to interfaith dialog and cooperation.[1] For me, this means the work is not an "added on" responsibility, but a necessary element of a vital presence in the larger religious community.

Thanks to the encouragement of Dr. Lucinda Mosher at Hartford Seminary, the generous Pastoral Study Grant from the Louisville Institute, and the ongoing engagement of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Owensboro, this third edition will expand the curriculum again and make it available to the larger religious community.

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[1] Intersection of Cornille & Bass

The methodology is very simple:

A pre-reading assignment before a module begins.

Information and study sessions as a group. Each session lasts 1.5 hours.

> This includes role-playing dyads to practice the conversational method of Theological Reflection used throughout the curriculum. The role-plays offer situations that a person of that Tradition might find difficult in everyday life.

Personal reflection and homework. Participants report they give about 1.5 hours per assignment to this. In most cases, each session has at least three homework options from which the participant chooses. This allows a participant to invest more or less time as needs dictate.

The curriculum is formatted as modules. The modules are:

Introduction to Theological Reflection (6 sessions)

> This module works best with multiples of 3 participants.

Introductions to Traditions (4 sessions each):

> Baha'i, Buddhism, Catholic Christianity, Hinduism, Humanism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American, Paganism, Protestant Christianity, and Sikhism.
>
> (A module on UU Christianity is also available upon request.)
>
> *NB: It is possible to include participants who are not interested in Mentor work in these modules, but in order for the process to work, all participants need to engage fully. No one should be treated as an auditor or exempted from the work.*

Introduction to Interfaith Dialog (6 sessions)

When participants sign up for a module, it is important to tell them that attendance at all sessions is a must. The modules are full enough to be a solid introduction for a conscientious adult learner. They are also short enough to convey: You have only had an introduction! If you miss even one session, it is a significant loss. We recommend agreeing on an absence policy at the outset. For us, all sessions had to be completed (at least with a make-up) in order to receive the Congregation's certificate.

The structure is actually very flexible:

The exception to flexibility is that the first module is always Introduction to Theological   Reflection.

> This is because it teaches the basic conversational model used throughout the curriculum.

Then you choose the modules that you need or want from the Traditions set with two caveats:

1) We recommend that you use a fun inventory to determine what are the strongest practices and/or interests in your group. (We really like *Who Is Your God?* by SkyLight Publishing for this.) It's much easier to start learning with a Tradition that speaks to the hearts of some of your group. We don't recommend simply taking a vote or guessing because people are often surprised by the difference between what they think they want and where their leanings really are! It's worth a session to map out where your group is starting.

2) We recommend that you follow-up with modules that will teach you about your partners in ministry.

Include the Introduction to Interfaith Dialog only when you have some participants that are at ease with the Theological Reflection conversation model. We recommend it after at least 4 modules. This capitalizes on Bennet's research (Intercultural Sensitivity Model) demonstrating that 40 hours of dedicated work with cultural issue begins to change one's attitude toward difference.[2] In other words, folks are primed by then.

One other thing... In my studies, I discovered that Mentoring, especially peer companioning, is well-received by folks who aren't usually "religious." It seems that because they've heard it other places, it doesn't feel threatening even to people who are suspicious of both formal religion and religious organizations. It also dovetails nicely with our cultural affirmation of self-exploration. This is truly a happy accident. I chose it because it made sense in our setting. My goal was to offer quality formation to the people who are doing the Mentoring in our Congregation rather than leave it to chance. I have come to believe the process is good for other reasons as well. For example, the skills can be used in any setting, not just interfaith or even religious. Go ahead, you can take them to work! Plus, growing an awareness of other Traditions, having resources and methods to study them, and making introductions with their practices are good for personal renewal of practices and understandings.

However, be sure that you fully integrate this into your programming and have someone to supervise the work. Although people will use their skills in many settings, it is important that they remember they are accountable to the community of formation and that they check in with a coordinator or supervisor regularly. If your place is as small as ours, this will be easy to do. But if you are in a larger organization, be sure you schedule regular updating sessions and appoint someone to be available to de-brief if a Mentor has concerns about something or someone. As organizations, we have an ethical duty to support those that we call into service.

The motto of my household is, "The gift you have received, give as a gift." (Matt. 10:7-10) So I, we, offer you some of the gifts we have received in this study and work. May they be a blessing to you! And may you give them away as well!

Claudia A. Ramisch

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[2] Bennett scale

OPENING THOUGHTS AND GENERAL PRINCIPLES

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Religious identity has always been a complicated thing even in ages where your religion might have been a given because of your locale or social status. It's complicated because it's about what is primary in our lives, that to which we give allegiance, and what values and priorities will guide our behavior. It has become even more complicated in this age in America because we have added some new considerations. In some ways the view is broader and in others it is much narrower.

First, we view religious identity externally. This happens in two primary ways:

A) We observe others in institutions, publications, or programs. Then we make value judgments. It's entirely possible that I know nothing about the church down the street from me, but I see the symbol and name on its sign or I hear its tagline on a commercial, and I think I know something because I've made associations in my head. If I visit its website and note what is and isn't included, I may make further judgments about it even though I've never walked in the building, met someone from the organization, or studied its place in the history of a movement. If a candidate for School Board lets slip that she attends there, I judge the church as well as her by what she says. It used to be a kindly maxim to a religious practitioner to behave well because, "You may be the only Scripture someone reads today." Now every priest, minister, master, and congregational officer is warned regularly that marketing matters as well. What people see and hear before they have any personal contact with an organization is very important to them. It's possible you will only have one shot at making your "pitch" and you may not even know you're making a "pitch" because the observation is wholly external.

B) We take notice of how a tradition or institution plays in media. This may be big media like national news or it may be little media like the newsletter published by the assembly to which I belong or the blog of some guru I consider respectable. We are influenced by both the images of big names (e.g. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama or His Holiness, the Pope) and by the images of the masses (e.g. unnamed "jihadists" or a group of "pro-life activists.") An image will likely include actual pictures as well as sound-bites and commentator buzz. If the images match our values, we form a positive opinion; if they counter our values, we deliberately avoid association with the group and possibly bad-mouth it.

Ironically, in observation and media, we tend to be very sure that anyone who walks into a given religious home, is fully committed to it and ALL its expressions. So we have weird moments where we expect the random Catholic to apologize for everything from the Inquisition to the clergy sex-abuse scandal. And we expect the random Baptist to applaud the Billy Graham Crusade. Of course, in the narrow view, we know our own experience is very different and we'd be disturbed if someone wanted to paint us with such a broad brush...

And this leads to an interesting second aspect: We view religious identity internally. This also happens in two primary ways:

A) We now choose how we identify. This may or may not have anything to do with our childhood or family practice. Even if we are remaining within a tradition that we grew up in, people have come to think of religious identity as chosen.[3] So you hear things like, "I am a liberal Christian." Or "I am a Reform Jew cantor who also raps." We may even name ourselves by some combination of practices that may or may not be tied to a community, "I am a solitary Buddhist Pagan."

B) We describe how we feel in connection to our Tradition, practice, or organization. It is important to us that we explain what draws us to what we are doing because we rarely accept everything with wholehearted conviction! Lest someone else try to tie us to troublesome broad images, we include in our identity our version of a disclaimer, "I go to my church because it is very traditional and doesn't skimp on doctrine." Or "I attend this Temple because it is very active in HIV/AIDS ministry."

This interesting dialectic of external-internal views of religious identity, shape the individuals for whom this curriculum is written. They are folks who
- know there is more out there than they have personally experienced,
- have a view of the "more" that may be definite but skimpily formed,
- have a sense of nuance about their own religious standing,
- and can name the issues that are most important for them to connect personally to a Tradition, practice, or organization.

Beyond this, I would name four major shifts in the American religious landscape that have some bearing on the work we are attempting in this curriculum.

1) **Patterns of religious formation are changing again for significant segments of our society.** Every religious Tradition has a normative pattern for an individual's development. The pattern may be described in terms of tasks to perform in the world or attitudes to cultivate--or both. However, in many religious Traditions, focusing on the formation of children and youth is not a separate issue from whatever formation adults engage. Interestingly, American religion parallels our societal development of childhood and treats children and youth as needing special formation.

Religious educators working with children and youth always face a daunting task as they try to explain an adult worldview and lifestyle in terms accessible to younger minds and hearts. For several decades now, they have been struggling with irregular attendance largely due to changes in family life. At the same time, something else has been happening with those that

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[3] John Cobb calls this a shift from inherited to chosen tradition. *Multiple Religious Belonging and Reconciliation* in Many Mansions (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002) pp.21-28.

have been fairly consistent in attendance. Whereas 50 years ago, about 10% of folks raised in a tradition would "drop out," "lapse," or go somewhere else, now almost half of those raised in a tradition, will end up somewhere else. In that same time-frame, we have fully implemented aged-and-staged curricula so that many religious organizations have created a parallel structure to general education structures.[4] Unfortunately, the implied message is, "Formation has an end-date and then you go away." Traditions that have celebrated rites of passage with teens know this is reinforced by their perception that the ritual is graduation. (Indeed some parents bargain with youngsters that they can quit formation classes if only they make it to that milestone celebration!)

It seems that we have unwittingly created this expectation: In all aspects of life, adulthood is done somewhere different from childhood/youth. The problem in our programming is not that children and youth are learning concepts appropriate to their developmental stage (obviously a good thing), but that they are not integrated into the adult community as they do it. In some cases, young people don't even attend worship or services with adults--or they only tend a portion of it. We have forgotten that human beings learn and are socialized just by being part of something--whether or not it is catering to their abilities or preferences. We seem to be afraid to "bore" youngsters with things they don't understand--forgetting formation is about much more than information, forgetting how many things they do understand, *and* forgetting our responsibility to help them process what they meet in the world even if it's "boring." The unfortunate consequence of separating children and youth from the community is they do not learn community etiquette, or witness adults struggling with religious issues, or have a way to imagine their religious life has an adult component within this group or Tradition. Whereas 50 years ago, about 10% of folks raised in a tradition would "drop out," "lapse," or go somewhere else, now almost half of those raised in a tradition, will end up somewhere else. And when they get to 'somewhere else,' they still need formation because they don't have adult religious skills... Especially if formation ended in adolescence, folks will prefer to be judged by their intentions rather than their actions or words and adult responsibility can seem harsh. Perhaps it's easier to discover that if you're not with people that know you?

I have heard colleagues worry aloud that they have people in leadership who 'didn't come up' in their Tradition. I don't think we need to worry about that, instead we need to remember that all religious traditions began with adults and the wisdom of the ages is still accessible to address this moment of adult need. We have the happy privilege of offering adult formation anew. *This curriculum works with adults of normal abilities whether or not they have lifelong formation in your particular community. It teaches them to learn skills for listening to two stories at once--their own and that of another (person or Tradition.)*

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[4]Interesting aside: One room school houses with intergenerational learning communities were retired 50-60 years ago allowing aged-staged curricula a clear path to full implementation.

2) **Religious diversity is more obvious. Religious illiteracy is rampant. And there are no neutral environments for encountering the world's enduring Traditions (or life!)** Religious diversity is wider and more obvious in America than ever before. Even small cities and rural areas, have more kinds of religious organizations than 50 years ago. When the Director of the brand new Owensboro Convention Center called upon the local Ministerial Association to send a representative to help dedicate the building, the President said, "How many traditions would you like to have represented?" It was a surprise to the Director that neither Owensboro nor the Association was   Christian-only anymore. Without stretching, we sent representatives of 4 Christian denominations and 5 other world Traditions. What a surprise it would have been if all our member Traditions could have been there that day!

Some of this expansion is due to waves of immigration (e.g. in particular Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc.), some to the work of missionaries or Westerners trained in Eastern schools bringing their training home (e.g. in particular schools of Buddhism,) and some to the courage of hidden traditions stepping into the mainstream (e.g. in particular Native American and Pagan.)

Despite diversity being more overt, despite the efforts of reputable scholars and serious institutional commitments to educate about diversity, there remains a lot of ignorance about even the basics of most traditions. If you think otherwise, take Stephen Prothero's 'Religious Literacy Quiz'[5] to a few family or community functions and see what kind of answers you get. This is a problem for civic life as we can easily misunderstand neighbors and the news and react badly to a situation.

Directly related to this is the problem of cultural misappropriation. From karma to human rights, elements from many Traditions are floating in our culture without the moorings of their history and nuance. However, they are not floating in a neutral environment; they are being used for everything from silly commercials to nationalist rhetoric. They are being absorbed and employed without being recognized as weighty religious elements.

So diversity of religious Traditions is more obvious in some ways and more hidden in others because we are not exposed to that diversity in a particularly thoughtful way. *Without* careful exploration of another's practices, *without* thoughtful identification of ancient treasures and insights, and *with* the previously mentioned influence of big and little media, many people are at a loss to make sense of religious life beyond whatever they espouse. *This curriculum helps people to respectfully consider traditions with which they are unfamiliar and to connect floating ideas and images to the proper roots of those ideas and images.*

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[5] Stephen Prothero *Religious Literacy*

3) Patterns of membership are shifting. Generally speaking, organizations are suffering-- especially if they rely on volunteers to do most of their work. This is because fewer and fewer people are joining organizations of any kind. There is a direct correlation between age and the likelihood of religious affiliation: Older folks join, younger ones don't.

Pew Research shows, that a third of Americans under age 30 do not have ties to a religious community and aren't looking for ties.[6] (The other two-thirds would be those discussed above.[7]) Other data shows that the sociological markers of adulthood have been pushed back in age significantly in the last half century. So for this same age group we're now talking about Emerging Adulthood (rather than Young Adulthood) to describe the gap between adolescence and the successful negotiation of the adult tasks of leaving home, completing education, becoming financially independent, mating, and starting a family. In fact what's most striking about this age group is that they are described as having no normative demographics.[8]

What about others who are not connected to religious communities? Of *all* the folks that identify as "nothing in particular," 90% of them *are not seeking* ties even though many of their values align very naturally with many Traditions.[9] The 'Spiritual But Not Religious' people are gaining in theological agreement with each other but they espouse development guided by the principle: I must keep moving to grow.[10] And those that left the religious home of their youth? Well, half of them will also keep moving--probably reaffiliating several times because of adolescent faith skills.[11]

Voluntary association is shorter term than it has been for a long time (pun intended.) Membership is not a favored category in religious life these days! Instead, many people today have relationships to organizations through causes and partnerships. For example, if you have a Walk for Alzheimers every year, you will see some people just for that event. And they will attend any event for that cause--no matter where it is. Their allegiance is to the cause not the

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[6] Pew Research
[7] An interesting side note: If you put these disparate pieces of research together, it would mean approximately one-third of a cohort that "should" have ties with a tradition (i.e. they have family members firmly established in a tradition), actually do have ties by the time they reach adulthood. Consider this: Because the Shakers were a celibate community they didn't have children born into the community, but they raised children of converts to the Society and they accepted orphaned or abandoned children, especially during the Civil War. They also kept records of this endeavor. They considered it a duty to teach them reading and writing, basic math, Bible literacy, and a trade so they could be self-sufficient in the world. However, children were not considered Shakers until they accepted baptism--somewhere around age 18. Only about a third of children raised by Shakers became Shakers. And the Shakers considered their work a huge success because so many educated, principled adults were sent into the world!
[8] Emerging Adulthood
[9] Pew Research
[10] Linda Mercandante
[11] Churchless Faith

sponsor or host. Or again, if you have a Community Garden, someone may appear out of the blue and offer to check the rain barrels and tools morning and evening for the season, but she won't ever join your organization. This person will see her work as a partnership--so she doesn't need to be a member. Both of these are very different sensibilities from membership and confuse many a volunteer coordinator!

Although many religious institutions are watching membership numbers decline steadily, the problem is not really the numbers; it's the uncertainty. With x number of members on the roll, we knew how many workers we had for a given task and how much money we could budget. Without x, we aren't sure if we can do that task or meet our budget. And more to the point, we are in the "business" of community not tasks or budget, so it's very hard to spend all our energy on tasks and budget and even harder to feel comfortable with simply trying to harness the "causes and partnerships" model. Lest we despair, it is important to remember that cultural biology actually affirms: We need community. (And we actually function best in communities of about 150.[12]) We don't know what community is going to look like in the future but we know some of us will have to hold the center. The task of discernment is profound. *This curriculum will not solve any membership issues, but will allow you to think about belonging and community in many different ways. It is designed for use in a community, to train members in that community with skills that help build authentic partnerships--even in uncertain times.*

4) **Interfaith work is not just for professionals and professors.** 1979, when the World Council of Churches articulated guidelines for a process of ecumenical and interfaith dialog, it started "at the top" with leaders of significant religious organizations, communities, and Traditions and with leaders in academia. This approach was in line with the Council's careful and excellent work throughout the century and yet it acknowledged that people all over the world already lived in inter-religious settings and had interfaith relations. They recognized that what they portrayed as "dialogic principles" is often just the lifestyle of good neighboring. Communities engaged this work much more quickly than the Council anticipated. In a very short time, 1986, the Council issued a study book for Christians to use to improve their dialogic skills.

Indeed, many religious communities have lived side by side in peace for centuries. This is really not surprising when considering the basic teachings of world Traditions. When unrest develops in such places, religion is rarely the cause. Sadly it is easier to portray the betrayals experienced in that unrest as religious than explain the machinations of someone pursuing power for self or family. It is also easier to cloak one's ambition in religion than to admit a lust for power or an addiction to violence. It is also important to recognize that religion often contains the words, images, and symbols that allow people to endure during unrest--adding to the religious depiction of the situation.

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[12] Dunbar's number

However, in America, inter-religious peace has often had a large dose of "don't ask, don't tell" applied and so religious illiteracy has deepened over time. It seems this moment is ripe for deliberate engagement and for the development of dialogic skills because 1) people are abandoning formation in a Tradition and exploring outside their inherited, 'family' zones, 2) pluralism marks every segment of our life so diversity is more obvious *and* appealing even if we don't really understand it, and 3) the categories of boundaries and belonging are being redefined by the upcoming generations.

The accessibility of information and the availability of welcoming communities of practice are gifts for all of us. If we leave it to professionals and professors, we will effectively refuse a gift of this moment. If we simply say, "Thank you!" and walk away, we will squander the grace offered to us. *This curriculum says, "Thank you!" to the world's Traditions and marinates in their history, insights, and practices. It does not ignore the troubles that every Tradition has caused or encountered, but it recognizes the endurance of a core of truth and the kinship of all people of goodwill faithful to these Traditions.*

My dog hates my ironing board because of the squawk it makes when I set it up. I jokingly call it "The Behemoth" because its big noise is monster-scary to him. But in reality, the noise has nothing to do with its function, usefulness, or consistent place in our household. There is a lot of flurry and noise in the religious world. A lot of it is uniformed, misinformed, or cheap spectacle like the noise from The Behemoth.

I think it is wiser to ignore the carnival moments and turn our critical eye to the quiet center of Traditions that have had a healthy function in society, been useful in offering sense, values, and meaning to their practitioners, and have held a consistent vision of a whole and wholesome world. Abrahamic, Dharmic, Earth-Based, and Humanistic schools of life have endured many tests of time and continue to offer us challenge and consolation.

And so, I offer this view of the American religious landscape. It is a complex view and all the important categories of identification are included. However, I have not made any attempt to represent those categories by size because the numbers and identities are too fluid to trust. Instead I have very deliberately placed the 'traditional Traditions' in the center of the spectrum. In other words, it remains not only valid, but essential, to encourage practice in and to learn about (or directly from) those Traditions because they effectively holding the center in the fluidity.