GOD BEYOND BORDERS
INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING AMONG FAITH COMMUNITIES

SHERYL A. KUJAWA-HOLBROOK

Based on ten years of research, God Beyond Borders is a comprehensive study of interreligious learning in faith communities. The United States is one of the most religiously diverse countries of the world. Kujawa-Holbrook details the many practices of interreligious encounters, religious education, shared sacred space, shared prayer, and compassionate action. The book also surveys the field of interreligious learning and investigates some of the more common intentionally interreligious communities—families, clergy groups, chaplaincies, and community organizations. Kujawa-Holbrook combines theory and praxis to make a case for the importance of interreligious learning in all religious organizations.

“From its founding, the Religious Education Association has crossed religious boundaries in an effort to learn from each other and to contribute to the education of the wider public world. That is precisely what Kujawa-Holbrook’s book does. Her survey of the scholarship on interfaith education is a foundation on which other scholars and practitioners will draw. The book offers rationale for interfaith education, describes processes of education, provides multiple examples of concrete practices, and highlights the profoundly transforming outcomes that occur.”

from the introduction by JACK L. SEYMOUR, Professor of Religious Education; Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Illinois

“Rich in theological reflection and full of practical advice for engaging across religious lines, Kujawa-Holbrook’s book could not have arrived at a better moment. As religious diversity continues to grow, communities across traditions are looking for authentic ways to engage in interreligious learning. Kujawa-Holbrook makes a convincing argument that not only is this crucial for the sake of our civic health, it is, for Christians, an essential way to live out the gospel.”

JENNIFER PEACE, Assistant Professor of Interfaith Studies; Andover Newton Theological School, Massachusetts

“Kujawa-Holbrook’s God Beyond Borders is timely and accessible, a must for those desiring a strong foundation in interreligious learning. The book is filled with insightful histories and contemporary resources. The reader walks away with a richer understanding of interreligious learning’s capacity for ending religious conflict and violence. Religious educators in seminaries and congregations, as well as organizations, will welcome this volume as a rigorous and practical resource.”

CHRISTINE J. HONG, Associate for Theology, Interfaith Office of Theology and Worship; Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

God Beyond Borders
Horizons in Religious Education is a book series sponsored by the Religious Education Association: An Association of Professors, Practitioners and Researchers in Religious Education. It was established to promote new scholarship and exploration in the academic field of Religious Education. The series will include both seasoned educators and newer scholars and practitioners just establishing their academic writing careers.

Books in this series reflect religious and cultural diversity, educational practice, living faith, and the common good of all people. They are chosen on the basis of their contributions to the vitality of religious education around the globe. Writers in this series hold deep commitments to their own faith traditions, yet their work sets forth claims that might also serve other religious communities, strengthen academic insight, and connect the pedagogies of religious education to the best scholarship of numerous cognate fields.

The posture of the Religious Education Association has always been ecumenical and multi-religious, attuned to global contexts, and committed to affecting public life. These values are grounded in the very institutions, congregations, and communities that transmit religious faith. The association draws upon the interdisciplinary richness of religious education connecting theological, spiritual, religious, social science and cultural research and wisdom. Horizons of Religious Education aims to heighten understanding and appreciation of the depth of scholarship resident within the discipline of religious education, as well as the ways it impacts our common life on a fragile world. Without a doubt, we are inspired by the wonder of teaching and the awe that must be taught.

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God Beyond Borders
Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities

SHERYL A. KUJAWA-HOLBROOK

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To my mentor, friend, colleague
Edward W. Rodman
God beyond borders
we bless you for strange places
and different dreams
for the demands and diversity
of a wider world
for the distance
that lets us look back and re-evaluate
for new ground
where the broken stems can take root,
grow and blossom.
We bless you
for the friendship of strangers
the richness of other cultures
and the painful gift of freedom
Blessed are you,
God beyond borders.
But if we have overlooked
the exiles in our midst
heightened their exclusion
by our indifference
given our permission
for a climate of fear
and tolerated a culture of violence
Have mercy on us,
God who takes side with justice,
confront our prejudice
stretch our narrowness
sift out our laws and our lives
with the penetrating insight
of your spirit
until generosity is our only measure.
Amen

# Contents

*Series Foreword*  |  viii  
*Preface* by Eboo Patel  |  ix  
*Acknowledgments*  |  xiii  
*Introduction*  |  xvii  

1. Ways of Understanding Interreligious Learning  |  1  
2. The Transformative Power of Interreligious Encounter  |  30  
3. Practices of Interreligious Learning  |  52  
4. Sharing Sacred Spaces  |  76  
5. Compassionate Action as Interreligious Learning  |  102  
6. Initiating Intentional Interreligious Learning Communities  |  124  
7. Interreligious Learning and the Future  |  146  

*References*  |  159  

*Appendix: An Interreligious Transformation Continuum for Christian Congregations and Organizations*  |  167  

*About the Author*  |  171
Series Foreword

The Editorial Board of Horizons in Religious Education is delighted to select God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities by Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook as the first book in the series. Indeed this book leads us towards the horizons of the field. What could be more timely in our world of rapid technology, almost instant communication, shifting political boundaries and alliances, and conflict, some of which results from religious communities? Her attention to how we can come to know and understand each other contributes hope to our world. Dr. Kujawa-Holbrook teaches in an interfaith environment and has comprehensively researched efforts across the continent to engage in interfaith learning and education.

From its founding the Religious Education Association has crossed religious boundaries in an effort to learn from each other and to contribute to the education of the wider public world. That is precisely what Dr. Kujawa-Holbrook’s book does. Her survey of the scholarship on interfaith education is a foundation on which other scholars and practitioners will draw. The book offers rationale for interfaith education, describes processes of education, provides multiple examples of concrete practices, and highlights the profoundly transforming outcomes that occur. Her work builds on and extends the mission of the Religious Education Association. We are honored to publish it. We encourage you to draw deeply of this book and further extend the horizons of our work for the flourishing of the world we share.
Preface
by Eboo Patel

Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook’s important book on congregations and interfaith cooperation reminds me of a crucial moment in American history. When, as a seminary student, Martin Luther King Jr. was introduced to the satyagraha (“love-force”) philosophy of the Indian Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi, King did not reject it because it came from a different religion. Instead, he sought to find resonances between Gandhi’s Hinduism and his own interpretation of Christianity. Indeed, it was Gandhi’s movement in India that provided King with a twentieth-century version of what Jesus would do. King patterned nearly all the strategy and tactics of the civil rights movement—from boycotts to marches to readily accepting jail time—after Gandhi’s leadership in India. King called Gandhi “the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force.”

Following Gandhi was King’s first step on a long journey of learning about the shared social justice values across the world’s religions, and partnering with faith leaders of all backgrounds in the struggle for civil rights. In 1959, more than a decade after the Mahatma’s death, King traveled to India to meet with people continuing the work Gandhi had started. He was surprised and inspired that this movement included Indians of all faith backgrounds working for equality and harmony, discovering in their own traditions of Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Humanism the same inspiration for love and peace that Gandhi found in Hinduism and King in Christianity.

King’s experience with religious diversity in India shaped the rest of his life. He readily formed a friendship with the Rabbi Abraham Joshua
Preface

Heschel, finding a common bond in their love of the Hebrew prophets. The two walked arm-in-arm in the famous civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. In his famous sermon “A Time to Break Silence,” King was unequivocal about his Christian commitment and at the same time summarized his view of the powerful commonality across all faiths: “This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality” is that the force of love is “the supreme unifying principle of life.”

One of the great gifts of Sheryl’s book is that it shines a light on this path that King walked, showing all of us involved with religious congregations how we can be interfaith leaders. There are too many out there who would say off-handedly, “The reason religions fight is because they’ve always fought.” But when we tell the history of America as it speaks to interfaith cooperation, we know that’s just not true. Rev. King and Rabbi Heschel are two examples of interfaith leaders—people who have the knowledge and skills to stop that fiction with knowledge, build relationships between their communities, and work together to better our common world.

What is especially important to emphasize about each of these leaders is that they had what I call a theology of interfaith cooperation, or knowledge of one’s religion’s inspiration to cooperate with others. At the organization I founded, Interfaith Youth Core, we believe that religion in the 21st century can be a bubble of isolation; a barrier of division; a bomb of destruction; or a bridge of cooperation. Faith communities make these choices, in part, guided by their theology of engaging the religious other. If you ask the people who are building barriers, “What in your faith inspires you to separate yourself from people of other faiths?” they will cite you chapter and verse. They know the scripture, they know the heroes, and they know the stories. So, if somebody asked you and me, “What is your theology of interfaith cooperation? What in the Christian tradition, in the Jewish faith, in Islamic civilization inspires you to build interfaith cooperation?” what would you and I say to that? This is an increasingly critical question to answer, and it ought to be answered everywhere from kindergarten religious education classes in churches, synagogues and mosques all the way to seminary. This book is an important guide on that journey.

Here is a small snapshot for what a theology of interfaith cooperation might look like for me as a Muslim. I hope as you read this, you’ll be thinking about the scripture and stories in your own faith that would make up your theology of interfaith cooperation. In the Holy Qur’an God tells the Prophet Muhammad that he was sent to be nothing but a special mercy
upon all the worlds.” The Prophet is described as, *a special mercy upon all the worlds*—not a kindness for Muslims alone, not an enrichment for the Arabs of the seventh century, but *a mercy upon all the worlds*. That to me is a vision of interfaith cooperation that transcends the lines of tribe.

Here is another story from Islam along these lines. There is a story of a group of Christians who came to visit the Prophet in the city of Medina, and they argued with the Prophet about the nature of Jesus, and about theology. When it came time for the Christians to pray, they asked the Prophet if he would give them leave, so they could exit and could give their prayers outside the city of the Prophet. Muhammad said, “Why would you leave? Offer your prayers in my mosque.” And the Christians said, “But we’ve spent the last several hours arguing theology. We were afraid you wouldn’t even let us leave.” The Prophet said, “Just because we differ on theology doesn’t mean I don’t offer you hospitality. It doesn’t mean I don’t seek cooperation with you. It doesn’t mean I don’t see you with human dignity.”

These are the building blocks of my Muslim theology of interfaith cooperation. The stories go on and on, and the scripture is seemingly endless. Just like in Judaism and Christianity, just like in Buddhism and Hinduism. But it is not enough to individually know these stories. We must share them with our congregations and colleges, and not only be inspired to love one another but to act on those theologies and build interfaith cooperation in our communities.

In other words, we must take upon ourselves the responsibility of bridge-building.
Ways of Understanding Interreligious Learning

I sense in some of the most strident Christian communities little awareness of this new religious America, the one Christians now share with Muslims, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. They display a confident, unselfconscious assumption that religion basically means Christianity, with traditional space made for Jews. But make no mistake: in the past thirty years, as Christianity has become more publicly vocal, something else of enormous importance has happened. The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth.

Diana Eck, A New Religious America (Eck 2001, 4)

Interreligious learning is now a growing interdisciplinary field of scholarly inquiry and pedagogical practice. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways of understanding interreligious learning, its development as a field of inquiry, and the range of approaches found within Christian faith communities and religious organizations. Integral to interreligious learning is the importance of personal narratives, both the learning and the unlearning of stories of religious pluralism, and the histories of faith communities from an interreligious perspective. The importance of religious literacy as a critical component of interreligious learning is discussed, as are the methodological tools which shape effective interreligious
God Beyond Borders

learning. Finally, this chapter will look at the Interreligious Transformation Continuum across Christian congregations and religious organizations, the implications of these varying approaches for interreligious learning, as well as suggestions for supporting future growth.

WHAT IS INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING?

Interreligious learning is an emerging discipline with the aim to help all participants to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to interact, understand, and communicate with persons from diverse religious traditions; to function effectively in the midst of religious pluralism; and to create pluralistic democratic communities that work for the common good. Interreligious learning is an interdisciplinary field that draws content, conceptual frameworks, processes and theories from religious education, religious studies, multicultural education, racial and ethnic studies, women's studies, youth studies, sociology, peace and reconciliation studies, congregational studies, and public policy studies. It also applies, challenges, and interprets insights from these fields to pedagogy and curriculum development in diverse educational settings, including faith communities, schools, and organizations.

Interreligious learning begins with stories and identifying shared values. As a process it should be grounded in the spiritual journeys of individuals and groups, and connected to a vision for humankind to love one another as neighbors. Interreligious learning, like other transformational experiences, will best occur within groups. While this does not exclude the need for individual interreligious learning and reflection, these experiences alone do not replace the importance of forming relationships across religious traditions within the process. Learners and their life histories and experiences should be at the center of interreligious teaching and learning. Learning which occurs in contexts that are familiar to people, that addresses multiple learning styles, and encourages critical thinking, shapes transformative interreligious encounters.

Interreligious learning values cultural differences and religious pluralism in learners, their communities, and in religious leaders and teachers. It requires cultural competency that understands the complexities of religious, cultural, racial, linguistic, regional, and national differences, as well as differences due to gender, sexual identities, economic status, immigration status, and age. Interreligious learning challenges
Ways of Understanding Interreligious Learning

discrimination and addresses intolerance and oppression. Throughout the learning process, sensitivity to feelings, conflicts, prejudices, generalizations, and other impediments to community building across differences need to be acknowledged and addressed openly. Power analysis and openness to structural equality and the redistribution of power among diverse groups are key values and skills in working for the common good. Shared leadership and facilitation is ideal in interreligious encounters, as is the need for democratic space and the expectation that learners are actively engaged in their own learning.

Religious literacy is integral to interreligious learning, including knowledge and understanding of one's own religious tradition, as well as other religious traditions. Interreligious learning builds on and expands the formation of positive and critical religious identities for all ages. It assumes that adherents are the experts of their own religious experience, and have perspectives and information which is of value to others. Interreligious learning strives to first recognize the good in one's own religious tradition and that of others, at the same time acknowledging that all religious traditions also have limitations as human interpretations of the Divine. In interreligious learning, dialogue is as much about listening as it is about speaking. Learners must be religiously literate and capable of forming relationships with individuals, families and communities in order to create environments that are supportive of multiple religious traditions, a variety of life experiences, and democratic action.

THE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE TRADITION

The fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Vatican II is a reminder of the importance of the council in opening the door of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as other Christian churches, to the possibilities of interreligious learning through deeper relationships with other religious traditions. Shortly after the council there was a burst of educational activity and publications from Christian organizations and denominations interested in pursuing interreligious dialogue. Given that Christians had maintained for centuries that there was no salvation outside of the church, and that other religions were seen as obstacles to mission, it is not surprising that potential dialogue partners from other traditions were skeptical at first about Christian motivations for interreligious encounter. Indeed, given that the slogan for the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 was "Christianization
of the World in this Century,” it is somewhat amazing that so many inter-religious dialogues did occur in the years immediately after Vatican II. In these early years, a spirit of enthusiasm often carried the day, and at times the need to develop intentional processes and language for encounter with other religions were neglected. Some of those most engaged in interreligious dialogue in the early years were criticized for losing touch with their own faith communities; others maintained a more conservative reaction to the quick pace of changing attitudes toward other religious traditions. The rise in fundamentalism across religious traditions also contributed to an attitude that positive religious pluralism and lasting peace were unrealistic dreams (Evers 2012, 228–29).

Despite these challenges, the field of interreligious dialogue has expanded over the past 60 years. It should be noted here that the term “dialogue” originated and is most often used in Christian circles, though it sometimes is adopted by members of other religious traditions. (The term “theology” is another Christian term that is used irregularly across religious traditions with a variety of meanings.) In some cases “interreligious dialogue” is used synonymously with “interreligious learning.” In other cases, interreligious dialogue refers to specific processes designed for interreligious encounters; including dialogues between experts, interpersonal dialogues between persons of different religious traditions; and community dialogues that are linked to social engagement and peace-building initiatives. Interest in dialogue as a methodology for interreligious encounters also spread beyond its Roman Catholic roots. The importance of grounding Christian theology in a religiously pluralistic world is the premise behind one of the first works on interreligious dialogue to be published through the World Council of Churches, My Neighbor’s Faith—And Mine (1986). Based in small group learning, the purpose is “to promote an awareness of our neighbors as people of living faiths, whose beliefs and practices should become integral elements in our theological thinking about the world and the human community” (WCC 1986, viii).

The many ways of understanding interreligious learning continues to expand today, including the tradition of dialogue, but also including a variety of approaches and methodologies to support and enrich encounters between different religious traditions. Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, publishes widely and is credited by many with developing the philosophy and pedagogy of interreligious thought and practice. In particular, sources
Ways of Understanding Interreligious Learning

concerned with interreligious dialogue often begin with Swidler’s work as a starting point. Recently Quaker teacher and editor Rebecca Kratz Mays published a collection of essays which update and expand Swidler’s work from the perspective of local communities, in *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots* (2008).

Interest in dialogue as a primary methodology for interreligious encounters continues to be a primary theme in the literature of interreligious learning. One who expands the more traditional frameworks of interreligious dialogue is Bud Heckman. In his *Interactive Faith*, Heckman builds on the work of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University and explores ways to balance dialogue and action in terms of learning styles, ethos, organizational structures, and mission (2008, 223). In *What Do We Want The Other To Teach About Us?* (2006), David L. Coppola of the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, encourages dialogue as a process which first views the other in relationship with God, before tackling the more abstract elements of religious belief. His book is a collection of essays on Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue written by experienced scholars and activists and geared for religious educators in local synagogues, churches, and mosques. “Dialogue and education are tools for each to approach the other as people in relationship with God first, and not as objects spouting abstract beliefs” (Coppola 2006, xv). Presently, Christian interreligious scholar Douglas Pratt, from the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and the University of Bern, Switzerland, is now exploring the various models of interreligious dialogue gathered from international organizations and prevalent over the last 30–50 years with intent to expand “the praxis of dialogue” in the future (2012).

Dialogical Jewish-Christian “conversations” as a means for greater interreligious understanding is the focus of the work of Joseph D. Small and Gilbert S. Rosenthal’s edited volume of essays on covenantal partnership, sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the National Council of Synagogues. The book is offered as a model to local communities to encourage the same conversations, including controversial topics such as the State of Israel, conversion and proselytizing, and intermarriage (2010). The use of dialogue as a methodology is also found in literature on Christian-Muslim and Christian-Buddhist relationships. For example, Jane Idelman Smith, professor of Islamic Studies at Harvard University and Hartford Seminary writes on the history, practice and challenges of current Muslim-Christian dialogues (Smith 2007). The release in 2007, “A Common Word
God Beyond Borders

Between Us and You,” a letter between 138 Muslim leaders worldwide sent to the leaders of major Christian denominations, and the Christian response, “Loving God and Neighbor Together,” affirmed both the differences between the two traditions, as well as the shared commitment to love God and to love our neighbors. The published letters and responses, A Common Word, are one example of the emergent dialogue between the two traditions (Volf, Muhammad, Yarrington 2010). Paul Ingram of Pacific Lutheran University studies the processes of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, mapping out the conceptual, socially-engaged, and interior dimensions of each tradition.

INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING
AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Interreligious learning today includes the interreligious dialogue tradition, as well as additional approaches. The importance of interreligious learning was argued by religious educators in the early twentieth century, particularly as people of faith struggled to make sense of catastrophic world wars. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, progressive religious educator Adelaide Teague Case worked with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and other peace organizations to draft studies and curricula focused on the need to bridge cultural and religious differences around the world. From the 1940s onward, religious educator Norma H. Thompson encouraged ecumenism, and later religious pluralism, and played a key role in Jewish-Christian dialogues. Case and Thompson are only two of the many religious educators who practiced, taught, and wrote about the importance of religious plurality, often before the interest of mainstream churches and denominations.

No critical exploration of interreligious learning would be completed without mention of the groundbreaking work of religious educator Mary C. Boys, now professor of practical theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Through her scholarship, Boys skillfully interweaves religious education with biblical studies, liturgy, and systematic theology. Boys’ work not only emphasizes the need for Jewish-Christian dialogue, but goes a step further by challenging inherent and inherited Christian supersessionism. That is, the belief that the validity of the Christian faith means supplanting the Jewish tradition. While it is important for Christians to encounter many of the religious traditions of the world, Boys asserts that for those Christians interested in fully engaging interreligious learning, understanding the
shared history with Judaism is inescapable. This is not to say that Christians should never engage traditions beyond Judaism. Rather, it is to highlight the understanding that, “There is no way to talk about Christianity without reference to Judaism” (Boys 2000, 7). Because of the historic ties between the two traditions, Boys argues that it is integral for Christian interreligious learning to take seriously our relationship with Judaism. Boys argues for the importance of educating Christians for fuller participation in a pluralistic world through teaching, preaching and worship that deconstructs inherited supersessionism, helps people understand what is wrong with it, and then helps them reconstruct a new “story line” that does not define Christianity over against Judaism. For Mary Boys, interreligious learning in inextricably linked to justice in “discovering the right way in which we might understand the people from whom we came and with whom we are linked to the God of Abraham and Sarah so that we ourselves might walk our journey of faith in a more trustworthy fashion” (Boys 2000, 8).

In Christians & Jews in Dialogue. Learning in the Presence of the Other (2006), Mary C. Boys and Jewish educator Sara S. Lee, director emerita of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education and adjunct professor emerita of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, weave together interreligious teaching and learning from the perspectives of both Judaism and Christianity. Through personal stories, case studies and observations tested through years of personal teaching experience, Boys and Lee make the connection between interreligious learning and the need to heal religious divisions by bringing people together to talk through difficult subjects such as religious identity, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel. Boys and Lee's theory of interreligious learning provides a platform for the emergent field today, including an emphasis on 1) “study in the presence of the other”; 2) intentionally connected content and process; 3) a hospitable environment which enables learners to cross religious boundaries, and 4) the need to “get inside” the religious tradition of another (Boys and Lee 2006, 95).

PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING

Austrian-born Jewish philosopher Martin Buber believed that personal narratives, or the telling of stories, brings healing and is sacred action. Buber tells a story about a man who was the student of a holy rabbi, the Baal
God Beyond Borders

Shem Tov. The rabbi used to jump and dance as he prayed. The story of the rabbi at prayer was so powerful that the act of telling it brought healing to the man as, “. . . he stood up while he was telling the story and the story carried him away so much that he had to jump and dance to show how he [holy Baal Shem Tov] had done it.” From that moment, the story-teller was healed. “This is how stories ought to be told” (Buber 1973, 71).

The poet Maya Angelou writes, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but, if faced with courage, need not be lived again (Angelou 1993). Stories have the ability to transform both the storyteller and the listener. Each person is the authority of their own personal story of religious pluralism. It doesn’t matter if a person does not have a formal theological education, or skipped Sunday school, or has not studied the Talmud or Torah or Qur’an. Efforts at interreligious cooperation are empowered by storytelling because stories convey lived religious experiences. Rather than beginning conversations with doctrinal debates or theological abstractions, beginning with personal stories enables people to appreciate each other’s human experience. Our personal experience is at the root of how we experience religious differences as well as how we experience God. “Telling my story is not in itself theology but a basis for theology,” writes theologian Jung Young Lee, “indeed, the primary context for doing my theology. This is why one cannot do theology for another. If theology is contextual, it must certainly be autobiographical” (Lee 1995, 7).

My own family of origin is Polish-American, people who encountered prejudice on a variety of levels, including language, immigration status, nationality, social class, and religion. As Roman Catholics, they were aware of the prejudices against them from other Christians. As immigrants, they knew the isolationist practices of the Midwestern city in which they lived and strived to keep their culture alive despite discrimination. The church was the center of every major event of their lives, and probably the most important institution to which they related. Yet, in subtle ways, they also embraced the pluralism of their context. They chose to make sense of their own experience of marginalization by consciously not doing the same to other people. So, unlike my peers’ families, my family had friends from other Christian denominations and Jewish friends as well. The priests in our parish church shared pulpits with the rabbi of the nearest temple and took people from the congregation to visit the local mosque when it opened. Years later, when my vocation led me to ordination in the Episcopal Church, that same family greeted the surprise of an ordained daughter with
Ways of Understanding Interreligious Learning

tears of joy. Although none of these actions was accompanied by splashy media coverage or elaborate programs, I have learned from my story the transformative power of local people of faith taking seriously the need to be in relationship with their neighbors and I believe that has a profound impact on faith communities.

The work of Frank D. Rogers Jr. on narrative pedagogies and young people points to the central role of personal narratives for interreligious learning. Stories transmit faith traditions, and therefore are important tools for religious literacy. They shape one's sense of personal and communal identity, and they mediate experiences of the sacred. Stories nurture critical consciousness and inspire social transformation. They also nurture and affirm creativity and public expressions (Rogers 2011). In another new book, the importance of personal narratives as a key methodology in interreligious learning for religious educators, community leaders, and activists, is the focus of *My Neighbor’s Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth and Transformation* (2012), by Jennifer Howe Peace, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley of Hebrew College and Andover Newton Theological School. Similarly, Miranda Sharp uses stories of intercultural misunderstanding to teach the limits of our own perspectives in order to shape encounters that are mutually empowering (Sharp 2013).

*The Faith Club* by Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver, Priscilla Warner (2006), and *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith* by Don Mackenzie, Ted Falcon, and Jamal Rahman (2009), are essentially collections of personal narratives by the authors, representative of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Both are used extensively for the purposes of study and to spark discussions in local faith communities. The emphasis here is on interreligious formation by moving people past feelings of separation and fear to a place where they are able to discuss critical differences and remain in relationship with each other.

In the same vein, Michelle LeBaron’s voluminous work on mediation and conflict transformation informs interreligious learning. LeBaron’s approach views stories as pathways to healing and transformation, and much of her work is about providing narrative tools to communities in conflict. “As we acknowledge the legitimacy of stories as ways of communicating and negotiating identity and meaning, we see that they are essential to our processes. They are the fabric through which conflicts are constructed and the threads through which relationships can be reweoven (2002, 249). LeBaron’s work is inclusive of many forms of difference, and is not limited to
God Beyond Borders

or focused on religious differences, though it speaks widely to the power of stories to build and sustain human communities. Stories connect us in relationship to others through content, feeling and meaning. They convey our deepest hopes and deepest fears. “They are openings into whole worlds,” writes Michelle LeBaron. In LeBaron’s work in conflict transformation, she argues that the power of stories can reframe and transform even the most deeply felt conflicts. She believes that stories are always present, in harmony or in conflict. They can be resources for relationship, or they can be resource for division. What matters is how we create, shape, interpret, and reinterpret our experiences. Stories are important resources in interreligious learning because they bring us into connection with those of other religious traditions; they stimulate empathy by engaging human relationship; they provide contextual information about another person or group; they convey their message indirectly, saving face, thus supporting a greater sense of harmony; and, they are opportunities to practice compassionate listening (LeBaron 2002, 222–23).

Interfaith families remain an important, though often neglected, source of interreligious relationships found in faith communities. Jane Kaplan analyzed stories of Jewish-Christian interfaith families in order to discern patterns that occur in almost every aspect of family life that are influenced by religious traditions (2004). These stories reveal the power of religious holidays and rites of passage, even for those who do not consider themselves observant Jews or Christians. The stories also speak to the importance of religious literacy; many of the couples interviewed wanted to ensure that their children adequately understood their religious heritage, even if the parents felt their own understanding was limited. As the numbers of intermarried families continue to rise, the need for interreligious learning that takes into account the realities of these families remains an important, if controversial, field of inquiry.

Marc Gopin, the director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University’s School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, writes about the inner lives of Arab and Jewish peacemakers, almost all of whom suffered violence or witnessed it against their loved ones. Gopin believes that one of the inherent skills of effective story-tellers, self-reflection, is also found in the narratives of extraordinary peacemakers. These peacemakers are conscious of their own internal life and struggles, they are prepared to face themselves ethically and spiritually, and they are more ready that the average person to share
Ways of Understanding Interreligious Learning

these stories with others as part of their personal growth, as well as part of their peacemaking. Gopin writes that self-reflection is a key skill if individuals and groups are going to overcome violence and despair. He argues that a central source of misery and conflict in families and communities, “is the emotional, cognitive and ethical failure to be self-reflective” (Gopin 2013, 6–7).

INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING
AND RELIGIOUS LITERACY

For Christians engaged in interreligious learning, it often seems as if other religious groups know a great deal more about their religion than we do. This fear can manifest itself in a reluctance to talk about religious beliefs, not only with other Christians, but with adherents of other faith traditions, or to avoid interreligious encounters all together. Thus, stress on religious literacy for all ages serves as a foundation for intentional interreligious learning. In his book Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn’t, Steven Prothero raises the issue of religious illiteracy in the United States. In his work as a religious studies professor at Boston University, Prothero noticed that his students did not seem to understand what he believed were basic references to religious topics in his lectures. So he devised a basic quiz to determine the students’ level of basic religious knowledge. Some of the basic questions in the quiz, included:

- Name the Ten Commandments
- Name the four Gospels
- Name the sacred text of Hinduism
- What is the name of the holy book of Islam?
- What is the Golden Rule?
- What are the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament?
- What is Ramadan? In what religion is it celebrated?
- Name the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.

In addition to his students, Prothero questioned his own children and came to the conclusion that both groups knew little about their own religion and even less about other religious traditions. This lack of religious literacy,
God Beyond Borders

suggests Prothero, is not only alarming inside religious communities, but is detrimental to participation in civic and political life. Prothero suggests that many key issues of our society today, such as immigration, marriage, abortion, the environment, euthanasia, poverty, capital punishment, and war are argued by invoking religion or the Bible, and thus, for people to engage these issues, they need to be religiously literate (Prothero 2007).

Diana Eck concurs with Prothero’s assertion that the new religious America requires a greater degree of literacy than is now the reality. “I think it is dangerous to live at such close quarters in a society such as ours, with a series of half baked truths and stereotypes functioning as our guides to the understanding of our religious nature,” she writes. “If you ask what my fear is, it’s that if our diversity becomes isolated enclaves in which we do not allow ourselves to encounter one another and don’t take on the difficult task of creating a positive pluralism in which we have engaged with one another, we may end up with communities that are more isolated” (Caldwell 2008).

INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY AND HOSPITALITY

Although much of religious curricula published through denominations or Christian publishers are predominately Christian-focused, there are some notable exceptions. Many of the denominational approaches to interreligious learning are focused on building relationships with neighbors from other religious traditions. Such relationships, it is reasoned, will enrich faith communities and local neighborhoods. For example, The General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church publishes an interfaith study guide by R. Marston Speight, Creating Interfaith Community, which focuses on the realities of religious pluralism in North America and on resources from the Christian faith in building community across traditions. The need for greater cultural competence in encounters with our neighbors of different faiths is the premise of Cherian Puthiyottil’s Our Neighbors: An Introduction to Cultural Diversity and World Religions (2001). This work by Augsburg Fortress is organized through five of the major religions of the world (Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity), along with the religious composition of 60 nations throughout the world. Though more a resource book than praxis-oriented, Grounds for Understanding (1998), by S. Mark Heim, focuses on theological responses to religious pluralism from the perspective
of a wide range of Christian denominations, including many major documents on interreligious relationships (Heim 1998).

Lucinda Mosher’s artful and articulate “Faith in the Neighborhood” series grounds interreligious learning in everyday encounters in local communities, as well as in the spiritual needs and connections we share; belonging, praying, grieving. Mosher, an Episcopalian writing for an ecumenical audience, argues that the Ninth Commandment warns us against bearing “false witness” against our neighbors. But how can we be assured that we are not doing that to our neighbors of other religions unless we know about their traditions and practices? If we are commanded to love God and our neighbors we must “be with” our neighbors, and thus, be equipped with deeper understanding across religious differences. “Christians know that all humanity has been created in God’s image . . . We can therefore be of better service—more loving, more respectful of dignity, more likely to establish justice and peace—if we understood how our neighbor ‘establishes, maintains, and celebrates a meaningful world,’ which is what religion does” (2005, xi). The “Faith in the Neighborhood” series is intended for study in Christian congregations and religious schools.

Building interreligious community through learning about Christian responses to religious pluralism is the premise of an interfaith curriculum published by LeaderResources in Massachusetts. Designed for use by youth and adults in congregations by Denise Yarbrough, an Episcopal priest, The Many Faces of God: An Interfaith Encounter for Youth and Adults, introduces the various Christian theological approaches to religious pluralism, along with an examination of the Nicene Creed, and specific teaching in the practice of dialogue.

The idea that interreligious learning is based in hospitality and welcome is the approach of several scholars. English Jesuit Michael Barnes in Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination (2012) argues the importance of interreligious hospitality, along with an emphasis on difference and particularity in the search for meaning. Barnes describes three shifts or “movements” that occur in relationship with the other. The first, “meetings,” attempts to situate interreligious encounter within the context of theology and history. Here he offers the image of religious traditions as “schools of faith” where teachers and learners can meet and ask questions about beliefs, actions, prayers and rituals with integrity. The second movement, “crossings” emphasizes the need for people to be translated across cultural boundaries if they are to learn the skills
God Beyond Borders

necessary for dialogue. “Imaginings,” the third movement concerns the return back across the threshold of engagement to reflect on the ways that faith is enhanced through interreligious learning and the need to imagine an alternative future. Barnes’ movements are not intended as fixed stages, but rather as a way of reflecting on the spirituality of interreligious dialogue. “More important than any such logic is the conviction which guides me throughout that, while Christian faith and the beliefs and practices of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists may be saying different things, the very attempt to grapple with difference in a spirit of generous respect can be mutually supportive and illuminating” (Barnes 2012, xiii–xiv).

The importance of hospitality as seen through the biblical text, is a framework for interreligious learning used by evangelical Christian contributors to the field. For example, Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong explores scripture, the practices of Jesus, and the early church to conclude that adherents of other religions are not objects for conversion, but rather a religious neighbor to whom hospitality must be extended and received. Through a pneumatological framework, Yong argues that if hospitality plays a central role in the Christian theology of religions today, than the result is not only a set of ideas but a correlative set of practices. “Christian mission in a post-modern, pluralistic, and post-9/11 world is constituted by evangelism, social witness, and interreligious dialogue and that evangelism and proclamation always involve social engagements and interreligious dialogues of various kinds,” he writes (Young 2008, 129).

INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Interreligious learning for children and youth and young adults is a growing field, although faith communities in the United States have fewer resources in this area to draw on than do those regions, such as the United Kingdom and some European countries, where religion is taught as an academic subject in schools. For example, Carl Sterken’s book on Interreligious Learning discusses mono-religious, multi-religious, and interreligious models of religious education as they relate to primary schools (Sterkens 2001, 47). The debate on the place of teaching religion(s) in the public schools in the United States is a long and complicated one, based in the need for more widespread religious literacy and skills to participate in democracy and navigate religious pluralism on the one hand, and the affirmation of the separation of church and state and fear of proselytism on the other. “One of
the greatest ironies of our intellectual life in the United States is that though we are the world's most religiously diverse nation we are also its most religiously illiterate,” writes Diane L. Moore, senior lecturer in religious studies and education at Harvard Divinity School and chair of the three-year task force of the American Academic of Religion on the teaching of religion in the schools. Moore's approach to overcoming religious illiteracy is rooted in cultural studies in an effort to mitigate the dangers of essentialism while retaining the critical and emancipatory dimensions of multicultural and reconstructionist theories (Moore 2007, 27, 78). Harvard Divinity School is also the home of the Religious Literacy Project, headed by Diane L. Moore, and designed to provide resources on the religious dimensions of multiculturalism in civil life for the use of public school teachers and their students.

The study of interreligious learning among children, youth and young adults based in faith communities is comprised of several approaches. First, grouped together under the unifying theme of the need to pass on religious traditions to the next generations or rites of passage, there are those studies which look at spiritual development and formation from the perspective of individual traditions. For example, James L. Heft’s work looks at the challenges of religious socialization among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the contemporary United States. Heft’s work is written in response to three national studies on youth religious development; Christian Smith’s study on the religious practices and understanding of teenagers in the United States; Sandy Astin’s research on college students and their sense of spirituality; and, Heft’s own research supported by the Lilly endowment on how synagogues, congregations and mosques connect spirituality and religious practices (Heft 2007,8). From the perspective of Islam, Robert Hefner and Muhammqad Quasim Zaman’s book on Schooling Islam examines the complexities of models of religious education in Muslim contexts. “We in the West would be truer to our own moral history were we to recognize that our schools and politics, too, bear the imprint of struggles over how children and citizens should ethicalize and behave . . . They are a civilizationally specific response to the challenges of pluralism, knowledge, and ethics faced by all citizens in the late modern world” (Hefner and Zaman 2007, 35).

Another volume funded through the Search Institute and the John Templeton Foundation and edited by Karen Marie Yust and others, focuses on spiritual development in childhood and adolescence in Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. Here the studies focus on the role of children and adolescents within the five religious traditions; question
how the traditions understand the process of spirituality in childhood and adolescence; examine which rituals and spiritual practices nurture young people, and guide them to meaning, purpose and ethical action; investigate to whom the religious assign responsibility for nurturing spirituality in children and youth; and lastly, examine how religious traditions address the social, policy and cultural forces which impact childhood and adolescent spirituality (Yust, A.N. Johnson, S.E. Sasso, E.C. Roehlkepartain 2006, 10).

Related to the field of childhood and adolescent spirituality is the growing multi- and interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC) in 1989, thereby affirming the rights of children to practice their preferred religion, and thereby challenging scholars, policy makers, religious leaders, and educators to cooperation and joint action for the sake of the world's children. At the same time, during the 1990s the theoretical boundaries of children and childhood were expanded, affirming their voices and agency (Ridgely 2011, ix–x). The work of Don S. Browning and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, challenge the adult-centric approach to the study of religions, and respond to the question, “How do different religious traditions in the United States today understand children, and how do people in these religions study and guide children in the light of the prominent threats and opportunities of American life?” (Browning and Miller-McLemore 2009, 1). Browning and Marcia J. Bunge studied the attitudes towards children, central religious practices, and the role children play internationally in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. “Religious images and understanding of children are not confined to the inner life of a specific tradition the spill over into the wide society, no matter how allegedly secular that society is thought to be,” write the authors. They believe that study of the relationships between religion and childhood are crucial “because they are often a source of deep tension and heated debate here and abroad.” (Browning and Bunge 2009, 3).

Intentional interreligious education with children is a focus in practical theologian Elizabeth F. Caldwell's *God’s Big Table. Nurturing Children in a Diverse World*, where she uses the imagery of coming to the table as a metaphor for the ways churches can engage pluralism through the biblical theme of welcoming all of God’s children.” The wrestling that is most needed by people of faith today and by congregations is how we understand who God is in relation to difference—people who think differently than I do, people who look differently from me, people of different faiths who
believe in God in ways that are unique to their traditions,” writes Caldwell (Caldwell 2011, 3). Caldwell also addresses hospitality to multifaith families and ways to introduce different religious traditions to children. Interreligious hospitality is a theme in Dori Grinenko Baker’s Greenhouses of Hope: Congregations Growing Young Leaders Who Will Change the World. Along with Katherine Turpin, the author argues that young people today live in a “new convivencia—a living mix of a multitude of religious beliefs and practices” and advocates for Christian congregations to practice radical welcome as a space for young people to reflect on their lived experience in an interreligious world (Baker 2010, 85).

Eboo Patel, director of the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) and research director Patrice Brodeur studied a wide range of international initiatives and projects of the “first interfaith generation” in their book, Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action. In addition to building a knowledge base in interreligious youth work, the work is intended to contribute to the global interfaith youth movement. “One of the goals of this movement is to empower each other to pioneer new and cooperative learning paths at the same time as we make room critical self-reflection through which scholarship can be produced as another tool for empowerment,” they write (Patel and Brodeur 2006, 1, 6–7).

Literature for children and youth tends to focus on building religious literacy in one’s own tradition as well as the religions of the world, an awareness of the stereotypes and common misconceptions about religious traditions, and the need for positive relationships with neighbors of other traditions to contribute to the common good and to live in peace. More so than in curricula for adults, literature for young people is organized around the idea of “world religions,” despite the limitations of that term, namely, it was constructed to lump together all religions which were not Christianity; that religious pluralism is located where we live, not elsewhere in the world; and, that the term begs the question of what is considered to be a “religion.” This problem with terminology aside, the importance of introducing young people to other religions in a positive way is an important consideration, and controversial in some Christian contexts. J. D. Rhodes’ World Religions, for instance, is focused on Christian youth interested in better understanding the religions in their communities; among friends, classmates, and neighbors. A more social studies approach is taken by Margaret O. Hyde and Emily G. Hyde in World Religions 101, which explores spirituality and religion from the perspective of a world phenomenon rather than
from belief. Included here for young people is a basic introduction to the neurobiology of the brain and its relationship to religion. Laura Buller’s *A Faith Like Mine*, is a celebration of the religious traditions of the world for children from the perspective of adherents who are also children.

In the United Kingdom, where religion is taught as an academic subject in schools, there is a variety of materials available for children and youth which can also be adapted for use in faith communities. For example, Religious and Moral Education Press (RMEP) has several series which introduce religions traditions for young people. The “Faith and Commitment” series looks at religions and denominations through the personal reflections of adherents. To create the books the authors visited local communities in Britain and interviewed people of different ages about their personal religious experiences (Sutcliffe 1984). The “Places for Worship” series introduces children into the sacred spaces of churches, synagogues, mosques, gurdwara, viharas, mondirs, and other sites (Broadbent and Logan 2009). Another series, “Times to Remember,” shares with children the major stories of religious traditions, such as the stories about Jesus found in Christianity, or the birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism (Broadbent and Logan 1988). Lastly, for youth, the “Faith in Action” series shares short biographies of men and women who have courageously acted according to their faith, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Jr., etc. The stories are focused on encouraging young people to empathize with the religious leaders by describing their situations, reflecting on related local and global issues (Constant 1998).

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND METHODOLOGIES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING**

Integral to interreligious learning are the conceptual frameworks, processes, and methodologies which help learners develop skills to better understand other religious traditions, and to better navigate, individually and collectively, the relationships found through interreligious encounters. Judith A. Berling’s book, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (2004), is one of the most comprehensive of these works. As professor of Chinese and Comparative Religions in the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Berling makes the clear distinction between the learning of *facts* about other religions, and *understanding*
other traditions and adherents. She suggests methodologies for interreligious teaching and learning in the classroom, in faith communities, and in theological education settings.

Case Study methodologies are central to the literature of interreligious teaching and learning. For example, Paul D. Numrich, who is both a theological educator and a scholar of religion, edited an illuminating collection of case studies of Christian congregations and their actual encounters with other religious traditions, in a effort to illustrate the joys and challenges of interreligious engagement (2009). In Britain, Malcolm Torry and Sarah Thorley documented case studies of Christians engaging other religious traditions in a variety of contexts; churches, hospitals, prisons, schools, women’s groups, funerals, on pilgrimage, etc. Each case study has a response authored by adherents of the partner traditions. Together they illustrate the many ways interreligious learning and engagement support spiritual growth and build more peaceful communities (2008). Kate McCarthy’s work on interfaith organizations, including families and faith communities is an expansive look at the wide variety of contexts where interreligious engagement takes place today. Importantly, her research delves into the subject of the online interreligious encounters where people of different religious traditions meet every day. McCarthy’s work suggests the need to explore more intentionally the way online learning shapes interreligious encounters (2007).

Fredrick Quinn’s interreligious scholarship focuses on Anglican and Episcopal contexts and analyzes case studies from the United States and the United Kingdom to document how Christian responses to other religions have changed in recent decades. Quinn’s goal is not to present conclusive findings, but rather, to make a case to the church that global interreligious contact is a reality, and that given this reality, Christians need to intentionally change how we teach and practice our faith. Quinn argues that in the years ahead, “Its [the church’s] teaching authority will be more that of advice and guidance in sound scholarship, than a defensive reassertion of ancient dogmatic formulæ. Its sacramental life will be more the offer of the unconditional and personal love of God to encourage human flourishing in an equitable and just world, than a hierarchical control of the exclusive means to eternal life. An institutional form will be more one of humble service to the community than of patriarchal dignity and control” (156).

The need to integrate interreligious learning into theological education in order to prepare leaders for a religiously pluralistic world is the
God Beyond Borders

focus of a number of initiatives, including Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue by David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell. This study moves the religious literacy of seminary graduates beyond Christianity, although that need is affirmed, to addressing ways theological schools address and structure interreligious engagement within the context of their curricula. Through case studies and sample syllabi Roozen and Hadsell create "a practical literature and related conversation among theological educators on the role of the practice of interfaith dialogue in the seminary curriculum" (Roozen and Hadsell 2009, 5).

Similarly, interreligious learning from the Christian tradition as a resource for religious leadership is the premise behind the book by David R. Brockman from Southern Methodist University and Ruben L.F. Habito from the Perkins School of Theology. The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology, and Spirituality in a Multifaith World (2010) weaves together a rich selection of historical and contemporary sources in support of interreligious dialogue and relates it to the task ministerial formation.

INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING AND PEACE-BUILDING

The connections between peace-building and interreligious dialogue and learning made by Amos Yong are echoed in the work of educators and activists from a across religious traditions. Peace-Building By, Between and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians (2009) edited by Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David Augsburger is a compilation of articles by Christians and Muslims on topics related to interreligious peace-building such as religious identity, religious conversion and apostasy, interreligious dialogue, conflict transformation, and human rights. David R. Smock’s Interfaith Dialogue and Peace-Building (2000) takes up the question of the relationship of religion to peace-building, and then offers principles in support of dialogue processes (Smock 2000,129–31). Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite’s Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War (2012) is a result of the Interfaith Just Peacemaking conference in 2009. Here “Just Peacemaking” theory is upheld as the fourth paradigm in the historic continuum of ways peace and war are addressed, including Pacifism, Just War theory, and Crusade. The focus of the collection of articles is on peacemaking practices that individuals and governments employ to save lives, and on the role of religion in informing those practices (Thistlethwaite 2012, 5–7).
Another approach to interreligious peace-building is provided by Peter Dula and Alain Epp Weaver through the Mennonite Central Committee in *Borders and Bridges* (2007). Here the authors refute the “clash of civilizations” thesis portrayed by the media and commentators which suggests that the tragedies of September 11, 2001 are the result of the divides between the (Christian) West and the Muslim world. Instead they urge a more nuanced, culturally competent, and religiously literate reading of world events. The book shares reflections of religious conflicts throughout the world, and the people and organizations who build bridges across the divide through interreligious and ecumenical cooperation, relief and development, and peace-building. Another contribution of the authors’ approach is their clear articulation of biblically-based Christian identity amidst a deep commitment to religious pluralism.

As the field of interreligious learning continues to grow, more research needs to be done in the areas named here and beyond, including making the connections between these diverse fields of inquiry. In addition, curricula and resources for local faith communities which build religious literacy among all age groups, and at the same time affirm the values of religious pluralism, are needed across traditions.

**INTERRELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION CONTINUUM**

What ultimately distinguishes authentic interreligious learning from episodic programs is the commitment to long-term change that transforms the lives of the individuals and groups involved. Each faith community needs to reflect deeply on its own story to discern what kind of interreligious learning might benefit the community. Though organizational theories differ, most suggest a five- or six-stage process. Though fairly few Christian faith communities will change to the extent that they are fully interreligious, the final stages in the change process apply to neighborhood organizations, to groups within congregations, to church-related schools and chaplaincies, and to other forms of interreligious cooperation, such as interreligious families, interreligious clergy groups, etc. The integration and application of several schemes suggests the following stages leading to interreligious cooperation (Kujawa-Holbrook 2002, 16–19; Knitter 2003).

Encouraging interreligious learning in faith communities requires a commitment on all levels of institutional life. While individual programs on other religions or isolated interreligious encounters may help individuals
gain a greater knowledge of religions other than their own, interreligious learning entails a commitment to a long-term educational process. Authentic interreligious learning occurs only when individuals and faith communities take responsibility to learn about other religious traditions, remain open to forming deeper relationships, and undergo a change process whereby all levels of organizational life are affected by the reality of religious pluralism. The Interreligious Transformation Continuum [see appendix] is a visual representation of the different approaches Christian congregations and religious organizations respond to interreligious learning, and the types of educational support needed throughout the process. Note that while the image of the Continuum here looks fixed and progressive, that the reality is that interreligious learning is often cyclical. The relationship between interreligious learning and faith communities and interreligious organizations ebbs and flows, and it is not uncommon for a group to see itself in several categories at the same time.

The Interreligious Transformation Continuum also reflects the theological tensions within Christianity as a whole across denominations and independent churches at this time within the United States, and in other regions of the world. The work of W. Paul Jones on navigating theological diversity within faith communities describes this as a tension of depth and breadth “from the near bankruptcy of two contrasting perspectives.” Liberalism, on the one hand, which stresses openness and acceptance of pluralism, but which can also fall into a relativism that robs Christianity of its uniqueness and therefore is less likely to inspire a deep commitment from its adherents. On the other hand, conservative Christianity, which demands a deep commitment and is numerically growing, but which also interprets the faith with a narrow dogmatism that contradicts the gospel it espouses. Jones’ advice to avoid both religious relativism and narrow dogmatism goes beyond liberal and conservative Christian stereotypes to argue for strengthening the capacities of individuals and faith communities to cultivate clear Christian identities, which also view religious pluralism in a positive manner (Jones 2000, 23–26).

In the first column of the Interreligious Transformation Continuum, the exclusivist organization does not seek interreligious relationships, either intentionally or unintentionally, and excludes other religious groups. Theologically, the organization may ascribe to a “replacement model” of Christianity. That is, the belief that Christianity is the one and only true religion, that there is no value in other religions, or that adherents of other...
Ways of Understanding Interreligious Learning

religions are primarily seen as opportunities for evangelism. Sometimes rigid exclusivism is found where there is limited awareness of what scripture or the church actually teaches, or where there is an agenda to limit social boundaries. Interestingly, the Pew Forum’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey suggests that overall most American Christians do not subscribe to a total replacement theology. Rather, 80% of American Christians believe that many religions can lead to eternal life, and at least eight in ten cite at least one non-Christian religion that can do so (Pew Forum 2010).

While many American Christians find the total replacement model harsh, a compromise is found in what theologian Paul F. Knitter calls “the partial replacement model,” or an approach that believes that God does speak through other faiths, yet finds salvation ultimately through Jesus Christ. The partial replacement model sees other religions as a way to prepare the way for the gospel, and thus encourages dialogue across traditions. Overall, the partial replacement model shows more compassion and mercy than does the total replacement model (Knitter 2003, chapters 1 and 2).

In organizations where both the total replacement and partial replacement models are operative, questions about who are saved and who are not saved are key and should not be avoided. Rather, what is meant by “salvation” should be explored, as the concept of what is meant by salvation varies significantly across religious groups. The late Krister Stendahl, a New Testament scholar, Lutheran bishop of Stockholm, Sweden, and proponent of interreligious dialogue, believed that ultimately the question of salvation remains a mystery. Stendahl framed his perspective from the apostle Paul as he encountered feelings of superiority among gentile Christians toward the Jews. “[Paul] is trying to come to grips with the fact that there is this feeling of superiority and he doesn't like it. And he ultimately says: ‘I'll tell you a mystery, lest you be conceited. And that is that the whole of Israel will in due time be saved and it's none of your business because God won't go back on his promises.” (Stendhal 1993, 3).

Another perspective articulated by theologian Mark Heim suggests that a way to avoid the pitfalls of all the models is to assert that all religions are valid paths, yet with different goals (Heim 1995, 6). Thus, within the context of conversations on salvation, there is opportunity for a wider concept, as well as discussion about the many ways Jesus himself welcomed those of other religions. Questions about Jesus’ own responses to religious pluralism, as well as his command to love our neighbors, are important foci for potential interreligious learning.