

***Coming to Know the Other – Coming to Know Oneself:
A study of Jewish-Catholic dialogue at the congregational level***

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Abstract: This paper is a report on an empirical research project involving members of two religious congregations, one Roman Catholic, the other Conservative Jewish, in a program of interreligious dialogue. The paper will describe the setting of the interreligious dialogue, the methods of the research study, report on the major themes that arose from that study.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the reality of increased religious pluralism in North America has inspired new thoughts on religious education and some empirical study on the effects of interreligious dialogue.¹ Findings from the studies and reports from those who have been in dialogue point to interreligious dialogue having a significant impact on religious identity. As participants have come to learn about the other, they have come to learn more about themselves and reflect critically on their own religious identity – whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim.² What I read in those reports rang true with my own long-standing experience in Catholic-Jewish dialogue. Religious identity not only gets more deeply held in the process, it also undergoes critical evaluation in light of what is learned about, and in the presence of, the religiously other.

However, I noted that all the reports to date have been about people who are either ‘religious professionals’ (e.g., religious educators, ministers, academics) or people who have been involved in dialogue for at least a year. I wondered what the impact of interreligious dialogue would be on the basic adult congregant of whom we cannot presume significant religious or theological training or experience with interreligious dialogue. Many adults in our religious congregations are dealing first-hand with religious plurality, whether in their workplaces, neighborhoods or, increasingly, their families. Are they in those settings, able to engage in productive conversation about religious faith and practice? Would normal congregants be interested and willing to participate in a more formal process of dialogue and learning? What happens to such people if they start the process? What would inspire them to do so? Would interreligious dialogue impact their religious identity, as it does for those who have been working at dialogue for some time?

¹ Most notable has been the work inspired by Mary C. Boys and Sara Lee on “interreligious learning” and The Catholic-Jewish Colloquium” of 1992-1995. Reported on in *Religious Education*, 91/4, Fall 1996.

² For self-reporting, see, Cynthia Reich “On Pluralism in Religious Education: How Jesus Changed the Life of a Jewish Educator” and Barbara Veale Smith “Encountering the Other and Deepening in Faith” both found in *Religious Education*, 91/4, Fall 1996. For a study, see Nadira Charaniya and Jane West Walsh, “Interpreting the Experiences of Christians, Muslims and Jews Engaged in Interreligious Dialogue: A Collaborative Research Study,” *Religious Education*, 96/3, Summer 2001, 351-368. Also see, Fayette Breaux Veverka, “Practicing Faith: Negotiating Identity and Difference in a Religiously Pluralistic World,” *Religious Education*, 99/1, Winter 2004, 38-55.

What follows is a report of a qualitative research study focusing on the phenomenon of conversation across a religious difference with congregational level adults who are engaging in such a process for the first time. As a phenomenological study I am looking at what happened in that conversation.³ Following the lead of the prior studies, this study was directed by a primary question: How does conversation across religious difference contribute to the examination and formation of religious identity? In order to answer that question several supporting questions were developed:

- How do participants see religious identity as part of their self identity?
- How do conversational dynamics contribute to the possibility that participants can be self-reflective?
- How does engagement with the religiously-other initiate reflection on participants' own religious identity?
- How does the conversational relationship impact participants' ability or desire to make changes in their own religious identity?

Although these questions drove the initial design of the study, both in the collection of the data and its initial analysis, the process followed for analysis was that of 'grounded theory,' in that I was looking for what would emerge from the data, even if it contradicted my initial interest or intent.⁴ As a result, other questions arose in the process that moved the investigation in new directions. As an important example, I realized that prior to participants' ability to examine religious identity, or elements thereof, they had to become aware that religious identity was something they were holding. Naming this further question allowed me to examine the data for moments of self-awareness and elements that brought them about. Analysis centered on this question and those posed above.

The Study Sample

Study participants were all members of the course on Catholic-Jewish dialogue, *Walking God's Paths*,⁵ and members of the two congregations: Holy Name, a Roman Catholic parish, and Beth Israel, a Conservative synagogue.⁶ Willingness to participate in the study was a prerequisite for participation in the course. Since it was hoped that the same course would be offered again between members of these two congregations, such a restriction did not preclude those unwilling to take part in the study from other learning opportunities.

³ A phenomenological study "seeks to understand the lived experience of a small number of people" in a given situation, creating "thick descriptions" of their experience. In depth interviews are often used to understand how the subjects are making sense of their experiences. Gretchen Rossman & Sharon Rallis, *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1998), 68-72.

⁴ "The grounded theory style of analysis is based on the premise that theory at various levels of generality is indispensable for deeper knowledge of social phenomena. We also argued that such theory ought to be developed in intimate relationship with data, with researchers fully aware of themselves as instruments for developing that grounded theory....Grounded theory methodologically emphasizes the need for developing many concepts and their linkages in order to capture a great deal of the variation that characterizes the central phenomena studied during any research project." Anselm Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 6-7.

⁵ Philip A. Cunningham, John J. Michalczyk and Gilbert Rosenthal, co-producers, *Walking God's Paths: Jews and Christians in Candid Conversation* (Boston: Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, 2003).

⁶ All names, both those of the congregations and of the study participants, are pseudonyms.

These two congregations were chosen for a variety of reasons. The primary reason was the level of existing interaction between members of the two congregations – not on a formal level, but as friends, neighbors and business acquaintances. In fact there had been no formal interaction between these two congregations prior to this project. Hope for future formal interaction between the two congregations provided the second reason for the study, particularly on the part of Beth Israel's rabbi. The third reason is more personal. I have been a member of Holy Name most of my life, and have had family friends and neighbors in Beth Israel all my life. The situation simply presented itself as a valuable opportunity: If I wished to understand how the opportunity for sustained and directed conversation between religious people would assist them in their own religious lives, as well as enhance their interaction in the public sphere with those who are religiously different, then this setting offered a valuable study site.

Advertising for the course/study was done through traditional means in the two congregations: bulletin announcements, newsletters, word of mouth and invitation. We were looking for a maximum of sixteen participants, eight from each congregation, so that if there was attrition or absenteeism over the eight weeks there would still be sufficient numbers for good conversation in small groups. Eight people from Holy Name signed up, and sixteen from Beth Israel. Fortunately, all eight from Holy Name were able to commit to the eight weeks, and represented sufficient sample diversity. Among the sixteen from Beth Israel, five were able to commit to all eight weeks. They and three others were chosen, based on the diversity I wanted to make up the sample.

Sample Criteria

It was important to work for a balance in numbers between the two congregations. I hoped that this would free people from having to speak from a minority position or representationally for their religious tradition. I also hoped that by meeting several people from a single tradition – and seeing the agreement and disagreement among them – a sense of the diversity of that tradition would be made available.

A range of ages was also achieved, although a higher range than I had expected: mid-30's to early 80's. There was a preponderance of interest from older congregants, which may have something to do with the amount of free time available to them. Or it may be attributed to the interest in and the tendency for generativity found in mid to older adults.⁷ A group was chosen from those interested that maximized the age diversity available.

A balance of male and female was desired, but fewer men than women expressed interest in the course. One man signed up from Holy Name, and he was chosen. Three men were chosen from the Beth Israel group.

All participants were white, of European background.

A significant element in the sample criteria was prior experience with members of the other faith tradition. I wished to look both at those with significant prior experience and those

⁷ Erik Erickson, *The Life Cycle Completed, Extended Version* (New York: Norton, 1997), 67.

with little or no experience. That was attained. Of particular note is that for six participants (three from each congregation), their long-standing relationships were with people in the course: two women have been neighbors and friends for 48 years; a mother and daughter have been friends with a married couple for 40 years. I wished to study what impact, if any, this process had on those relationships. For those with no or little prior relationship, I wished to study how the course assisted in the development of relationships, and if that enhanced the learning about the other.

CLASS AND STUDY PARTICIPANTS

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Prior relationships</i>	<i>Education completed</i>
Alice	85	Roman Catholic	Little/None	High school
Betty	68	Roman Catholic	Significant	Undergraduate
Caroline	48	Roman Catholic	Little	Graduate
Diane	55	Jewish	Significant	Graduate
Elaine	66	Jewish	Significant	Graduate
Frances	77	Roman Catholic	Significant	Undergraduate
Gladys	68	Jewish	Some	Graduate
Howard	72	Jewish	None	Graduate
Izzy	78	Jewish	Significant	Graduate
Jim	35	Roman Catholic	Little/None	High School
Kelly	48	Roman Catholic	Some	Graduate
Linda	70	Roman Catholic	Significant	High School
Max	44	Jewish	Significant	Graduate
Nathan	78	Jewish	Some	Graduate
Olivia	76	Jewish	Significant	Graduate
Patricia	81	Roman Catholic	Little/None	High School
The Rabbi	41	Jewish	Little	Graduate

Limitations of sample

The obvious limitation in the sample is that it is not fully representative of the two congregations, either in age diversity, gender, marital and family status, racial diversity, or marginality to the congregations. These limitations might have been overcome through a greater recruitment effort. However, I feel that although not very diverse, both groups are representational of the adults of their congregations: older, predominantly European in origin, more women than men, diversity in education, from lower-middle to upper-middle class.

Another limitation is that all study members identify religious belief/practice as important to their lives and most are very involved in the life of their congregation. This study is therefore not able to give us an understanding of how this process would affect those who see themselves as marginal to their tradition or congregation. In fact, to attract such participants a very different recruitment method would probably be needed.

A final limitation worth naming is that this study took place in a small New England city (population 45,000) with a relatively stable population. Several of the study's members are native to the area, although they may have spent some of their life living elsewhere. So this

study may reveal different findings than a study in an urban setting, or with a transient population.

Although not necessarily a limitation of this sample, it is essential to note that I knew 14 of the 16 participants prior to their enrollment in this course. This was not something I sought, but it is representative of the nature of the community and my relationships through family and work. An obvious advantage was the desire of the participants to see me do well. As one woman shared, “You should get your Ph.D. just for doing this course.” Their desire for my success demonstrated itself in their willingness to be participants in the study, their trust in my judgment and discretion, and the forthcoming nature of their interviews. Although they knew in vague terms what I was looking for – issues of religious identity – it was clear to me that they did not know what would make “good data.”

Since I knew many of the participants quite well, I was able to sense what was in character and what was not, therefore I was able to see small changes that might go unnoticed by someone unfamiliar with the group. I was assisted in the course by Beth Israel’s rabbi, who had been serving that congregation for just over a year, and by the Adult Education Coordinator of Holy Name, Betty, who was very familiar with most of the church’s participants. Each facilitated one of the small groups for discussion. The potential limitation of my feeling familiar with the group, and therefore overly confident in my readings of their behavior, was kept in check by their knowledge and observations of those same people. More will be said below on how this was managed.

The Course

Before proceeding further with the study it is appropriate to describe the course that was designed as the setting for this project. The basis for the course on Catholic-Jewish dialogue was *Walking God’s Paths*, a six-part video program recently produced by the Center for Christian-Jewish Study at Boston College. Around this video program the rabbi and I designed an eight session course, which took place on Wednesday nights from January 21 to March 10, 2004. The class met for two hours each evening, and met alternately at the synagogue and the parish so both congregations would serve as host.

Six of the eight sessions included a brief video segment (12-15 minutes), and all sessions included some live presentations by me or the rabbi (5-15 minutes). Our live presentations were intended to prepare the group for the video, or do further explanation on some point raised in the video. Included in the course were tours of both congregations’ worship space. Some sessions were supplemented by outside reading, which we provided.

On average at least half of the class time was spent in conversation among group members. This was done either in facilitated group discussions of no more than eight members, or in pairs of students (one Jewish, one Catholic) working on textual material.⁸ Twice in the course the small groups were faith-alike, in which Jews talked to only Jews and Catholics to only Catholics. The remainder of the time the groups were faith-different with an equal number of Catholics and Jews present. The rabbi and Betty served as the facilitators of the small groups.

⁸ This is based on the traditional Jewish style of Hevruta study of Bible and Talmud.

Calling on Betty to serve in this capacity freed me to attend to recording and observations of both groups during discussions.

The membership of each small faith-different group was consistent and determined by me. My intent in keeping the groups consistent was to facilitate the development of relationships and a conversational dynamic. I had certain criteria for determining group membership: to separate couples/family groups; keep together already established faith-different friendships; distribute the four male members equally; balance out quieter and more verbal members; put together people who might develop relationships.

The design of the course was shaped by two primary convictions of mine. The first is that religious traditions are carried by their practitioners. Although religious leadership and theologians, through their various means of influence determine rulings, teachings and polity, it is the membership at large who carry forward the tradition in their own practice and understanding. The second follows on the first. One of the best ways to learn about a religious tradition is to meet as many practitioners of that tradition as possible.

Although each class included some form of presentation, whether video or live, presentations were to serve as talking points around which informed discussion could happen among the group's members. We were aware that class members would be well served to learn about their own tradition as well as that of the other, so presentations were given to the whole group, presuming little foreknowledge of the material by the members. As the rabbi and I met to plan each session, these convictions drove us, and kept us from overloading the course with presentations. Frequently we reminded ourselves that we could not adequately attend to any given topic completely in the time available and that was not the goal. So we would ask ourselves, *What of this subject do they need to know in order to talk intelligently among themselves?*

Discussion questions drew on the information presented, but were devised so that participants would share out of their own experience and understanding, focusing on how their traditions touched on personal practice and meaning.

The Methods of Data Collection

Data were collected in six distinct forms.

1. *Session observations:* During each session I took notes on the interaction among the participants, both verbal and non-verbal. Since I generally arrived on site prior to any participants I was able to note even who came in when and with whom, seating choices, informal conversation, etc. The time I spent giving presentations to the group was quite limited, therefore I was able to take observation notes through most of the class period, including breaks. Following every session I met with the rabbi and Betty to compare notes on observed behavior. At that time they also offered their own observations on the class proceedings, and sometimes shared conversations that happened outside of class time that were directly related to our work. I wrote up these observation notes each week as an ongoing journal.

2. *Recording of small group conversations:* In seven of the eight sessions the large group broke down into two small groups, or pairs (depending on the task at hand). For six of the sessions I was only able to audio record and observe one group at a time; only during one session was I able to tape both groups simultaneously. I chose to record and observe a group depending upon an expectation of that group's reaction to class material. All recorded discussions, including pairs, contained at least one interview subject. I later transcribed all of those small group discussions. Although time consuming, I did this work myself because it was necessary to discern as many as eight different voices involved in a single conversation.
3. *Intake surveys:* The beginning of the first class meeting involved time in which I explained the study and had participants fill out a paper and pencil survey. This asked for demographic information: age, length of membership in their particular religious tradition, formal education, how often they participated in worship and in adult religious education. It also asked them to name their reasons for enrolling, whether they had any prior relationships with someone of the other tradition, and, if so, whether they had ever had opportunity for religious discussion with that person. All sixteen participants completed this survey and I started a file on each participant to which I later added further data as noted below.
4. *Exit evaluations:* After the course was completed I met one-on-one with the participants, outside of class time, to complete a course evaluation. They were asked to rate, on a 1 to 4 scale, the value of different educational tools and processes – live and video presentations, small group conversations, etc. I asked them to name their greatest learning and their most significant experience in the course. I asked them if understanding of their own tradition had changed in any way. They were asked if there were any particular people they were glad to have met or know better. I asked them whether their impression of the other tradition had changed or deepened in any way, and to what would they attribute that change – meeting the other people or the presentations. The one-on-one format of the evaluations, some of which were audio taped, allowed me to ask more probing follow up questions, or redirect a question if I felt the sense of it was not being understood. Fourteen of the participants were available for the evaluation. These were entered into their files, and where applicable, transcribed.
5. *Interviews:* Four of the participants were the subjects of interviews. Of the several who volunteered, I chose a diverse grouping: two Jewish, two Catholic; two male, two female; two long-standing prior relationships, two little/none; and a range of ages. Three were able to do three interviews over the weeks of the course; one was able to do only two, as she was out traveling for several weeks at the end of the course. Her second interview contained some questions from the final interview. Each interview was designed with a different focus:
 - a. The first had to do with their expectations for the course; any prior relationships with the other, their own sense of religious identity (participation in worship, education, etc.), and their understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.
 - b. The second interview focused around the conversations in the class: How they thought they were going. To name the value of the experience, any ease, difficulty, or surprises.

- c. The third interview focused on the relationships that were developing in the class, or changes to existing relationships, and how they were impacting their own enjoyment and learning. These final interviews also included the exit evaluations, so those questions from section 4 were included at this time.

Although each interview had a primary focus, the process was fluid, allowing me to follow leads that looked interesting, refer back to points raised in earlier interviews, or ask about observed behavior in the session. I transcribed each interview verbatim and added them to the interviewees' files.

6. *Journal entries:* Since several participants were willing to be interviewed, but I was unable to manage more than four interview subjects, I asked four people to keep journals through the course. I supplied them with the same questions as served as the basis for the interviews, at the same intervals over the course period. Occasionally I added a question that was particular to one participant, based on observations of that person's interaction. Three of the four were able to pass their entries onto me electronically, and I was able to enter them into their files with little effort. The fourth journal had been hand-written and I typed it into her file. These were not as rich as the interviews; responses tended to stay brief and on the surface. They would have benefited from greater prompting and probing.

The Management of Multiple Sources

Although the data collection processes I followed meant I was swimming in data, I was able to cross-reference, or triangulate, the sources in an effective manner and achieve strong validation.⁹ Triangulation of data was possible through various means:

- My own observations were triangulated with those of my two colleagues. I met regularly with the rabbi and Betty, and was able to get their read on observed behavior, check it against what they already knew of the participants and learn what the participants may have shared with them. This process usually affirmed, but sometimes challenged my interpretations.
- My interpretations of class observations could be checked in an interview or an evaluation against the participant's own understanding of his or her behavior. Very often this offered greater nuance to my own interpretation.
- Occasionally participants told stories that gave me greater insights on other class members, which served to enrich the portraits I was able to create.
- One Hevruta pair consisted of two journal-keepers, and another pair consisted of a journal-keeper and an interview subject. The journaler-interviewee pair was also consistently audio-recorded. These various forms of data enabled me to ask about and compare their experiences in the pairing.
- Since I had audio recorded the group discussions I was able to check the participant's words in the group against their words in an interview or evaluation on the same subject. Sometimes that served to clarify what they had said in the group discussion. Sometimes that offered them the opportunity for further reflection on the topic. And sometimes it stood in contradiction to what they had stated in the group. In the third instance I then had to consider why that seeming contradiction might exist: Was it a miss-read on my part? Was it a desire for

⁹ G. Rossman and S. Rallis, *Learning in the Field*, 42.

them to self-present well? Was I giving something more attention because it had meaning to me, but they did not see its importance and therefore forgot it or put it aside?

In light of the potential for contradictions or misinterpretations, it is valuable to have multiple data sources so that such cross-referencing can occur.

The Process of Data Coding and Analysis

As noted above all forms of data were filed and made available for coding and analysis. The number of sources and their richness meant that I had an significant amount of data through which to sift. I used the *HyperResearch* software to manage the data. It allowed for easier coding and speedier sorting and analysis of the data than if done by hand.

I began an open coding process, with an initial 13 codes and added new codes almost immediately as the data suggested. In time I had over 40 codes working.¹⁰ Paying attention to the development of codes was itself revelatory. I noticed that items I was initially expecting to find (those indicating critical reflection on religious identity) did not appear, but others items did (e.g., signs of comfort, relationship development, self-awareness). The open coding lead to analysis on how those codes were related: what were their conditions, interactions and consequences?

Coding in this manner helped me shift my attention from expected to actual indicators emerging from the data. Unlike in prior studies, there were no strong or frequent indications of participants reflecting critically on their own religious identity. However, there were strong indicators of relationship and conversational development (as seen through physical cues, moments of self-disclosure, thinking aloud, questioning, emotional comfort and discomfort), increased self-awareness and deepening commitment among the participants to the course and process.¹¹ Although I could not say that critical reflection on religious identity was happening, the data revealed that something significant was going on.

Throughout my analysis the question I asked the data was, What is the main story here? Three primary themes arose, which were each supported by subcategories. Those primary themes are: Conversation is a learned activity; the conversational relationship grounds learning about the other; and conversation with the other spurs self-awareness.

The Findings

1. Conversation is a Learned Activity

Conversation was different from initial expectations – Some observations about the group must be made at the outset. First of all it has to be recognized that to some degree those who sign up for a course are self-selective. It is unlikely that people opposed to dialogue and learning are going to sign up for such a course as *Walking God's Paths*. That being said, it was immediately apparent that the members of this course were people of sincere good will. They

¹⁰ See appendix for full list of codes.

¹¹ Not immediately apparent in the data, but of note is the fact that all of the course's members indicated a desire to continue the process together when the eight session course was completed. The group has met four times over the summer months of 2004, and wish to make plans for the fall of 2004.

hoped to make the best of the experience and learn from one another. Intake surveys indicated that only half of them enrolled because they had a close friend or relative who was of the other tradition. Yet almost all indicated that they “have always been interested in the topic.”

However, interest and willingness in dialogue or conversation across religious difference does not indicate skill or ease with such conversation. In fact, a three interviewees indicated some anxiety about the forthcoming conversation. In our first conversation I asked Jim, a 35 year old Catholic, if there were any people in the group who seemed like they would be good conversation partners, Jim responded:

No not yet. I think that I kinda, at first, very much sit back and observe the crowd a bit before I get to tangle with some people on some certain things or whatever, so I think that we'll see what happens.

In that first interview he used the words ‘tangle,’ ‘debate,’ and ‘argue’ when talking about the upcoming classes. When I asked him if he expected the discussion to be contentious he backed off a bit, saying:

No I think there's always,...It may not present itself in this situation, but I think a lot of times when a group is put together there is always things people have disagreements on or don't agree with something in your faith or their own faith. And I think a lot times there can be some heated debate about it. I don't really expect to see that though; I think that this is, more of a, I think I'm more used to it in people who are younger.... But, I'm sort of seeing it in that sense and this is a much older group; I don't anticipate much like that. I think it will pretty smooth sailing. (Int. 1)

Jim is a young man, very devoted to his Catholic faith and practice, and as such he often finds himself in the position of defending or explaining his belief and practice to his contemporaries who do not share his faith. Being in a setting with older adults who do share his sense of commitment, if not his particular outlook and practice, was to be a new experience for Jim.

Kelly on the other hand did not expect conversation to be very open simply because the participants may have already known each other too well.

Kelly: I regret that I know so many people in this group, already. And I think I could learn more if I didn't know as many people. I don't know, you know.

T.: Do you think that because you know them you know them well, or that because you know them it will inhibit getting to know them in a new way.

Kelly: I think that's it. As much as we promised to speak openly, but many in the group know each other too well to speak openly, as if we were strangers or each came from a different county.

...

T.: Do you think you will be inhibited in your discussion?

Kelly: No. Yes, I will. I absolutely will. Not as much as, I will make a real

effort not to be, but I know I will be. I have a huge cringe factor. If I hear people saying anything that is too embarrassing I get cringy. And I would love to get up and leave the room. I've always been like that. (Int. 1)

Finally, Howard, an older Jewish man, often repeated the maxim, “You should never talk about politics or religion in polite company.”

Models for good conversation – the capacity for give and take, learning and listening, thinking aloud – are few and far between in North American culture. We are more accustomed to the series of monologues offered by the talking heads on Sunday morning news hours, or talk radio. So I was not surprised to find people’s expectations for frank and respectful conversation low. To that end, the rabbi and I set parameters for the discussion by the creation of ‘ground rules’ set by the group, facilitated discussion, and focused discussion questions, all of which we hoped would promote productive conversation.

Conversation benefits from ‘ground rules’ and facilitation – It was the rabbi’s idea to have the participants name the ‘ground rules’ at our first meeting, rather than have us suggest them to the group. We initiated the plan with a simple and brief sharing discussion in which all participated in turns: “My favorite thing about being Jewish/Catholic is...” Following that the group was asked what attitudes or behaviors are needed to create a space for dialogue. With little coaching the group came up with the following ‘ground rules’ for their own discussion: Do not jump to conclusions about the other’s intent; No cussing; Be willing to listen beyond your own parameters; Use “I” statements; Accept that there is no one right way; Accept differences with respect; Questions of classification are welcome; Let others finish their thoughts; Don’t monopolize the discussion; Be comfortable to share [outside of the class/group] in a generic way the content of the conversation; Don’t speak representationally for the tradition, speak for yourself. This list was written on a large piece of newsprint and was posted each week.

Although the list was visible each week I thought after some time that its presence was unimportant since reference was seldom made to it during class time. However I discovered in the interviews that the rules were very much on the mind of the participants. Olivia pointed to them most strongly when she said:

There's been nobody that sat mute. What I loved is the way it was set up initially, when we said being civil and being tolerant and not pooh-poohing anybody's ideas, have really been terrific.

T.: You think those rules were valuable rules to have in place?

Olivia: They are the best.

T.: Good.

Olivia: And I think had they not been listed as they were, people may [not] have been mindful of them. When people saw them in print and they realized that they can't say, “You’re full of crap. Where did you get this idea?” Everybody's been polite, but they speak their mind, that's what I like. Nobody's intimidated. So that's been very valuable.

T.: Just the ethic that's kinda developed in the group?

Olivia: Absolutely. And asking questions, and some people have expressed their beliefs, and others, people have been very good listeners. Nobody certainly has been bored. It's been great. (Int. 2)

Besides the ground rules, the presence of facilitators – the rabbi and Betty – also helped the groups stay on topic. The conversations were usually structured around one or two related discussion questions. The questions built on the presentations, but usually required the participants to give a personal perspective on the material. The facilitator's role was to keep the discussion on track. Several members of Betty's group commented on the skill and care with which she kept the conversation focused, also reminding them occasionally to make "I" statements, rather than speak for everyone.

Discipline and parameters allow for freedom of inquiry – The discipline of ground rules, discussion questions and facilitation allowed the participants to focus intentionally on material that was not likely to come up in 'polite' conversation – their religious belief and practice and its meaning for them. Both Gladys and Max admitted to their group that talk about Jesus was taboo in their growing up as Jews, and that talking about Jesus has been a question for both of them as they raise their own children in Judaism. So for them to learn with Catholics about Jesus and to ask questions of them about their faith in Jesus was a rare opportunity. My session notes recount this exchange:

I talked to Max immediately afterwards [He was seated right in front of me]. I sat down next to him. He finds this all fascinating to talk to people. To learn about the history, but also to have the chance to ask people things you never get to ask. Also to "go over to the other side" and see what's there. "You never get that opportunity." And he commented on being able to do that in a safe environment. He is struck by people's efforts to make themselves understood, but how difficult it is to take it in and assimilate it. He's having a wonderful time with it all and is so impressed by the process. (Session C)

Max is an attorney who specializes in mediation, so is quite familiar with the challenges of good communication, but he was regularly impressed with how the process of the group conversations allowed discussion to travel in directions he never imagined possible.

Kelly, who early on was anxious that the conversation among people who knew each other too well might not be able to get beyond politeness, admitted that this process had not "devolved" as she had expected. She attributes that to the planning and process:

Yeah, it is, it's not allowing, it's not coming in and saying, "Well we thought tonight we might..." It's not giving us any options. You know, it's having specific questions to answer and having the videos to watch and having the focus questions so you're paying attention and when you hear one of the key words, you hear, tonight's word is, you take notes. It's not giving us the opportunity to veer off into unproductive areas. (Int. 2)

The discipline of the setting and the earnestness with which participants entered the process, allowed for members to enter into meaningful conversation quickly.

Productive conversation includes respectful disagreement and thinking aloud – For several of the participants, a basic comfort was established almost immediately, but it was also acknowledged that it deepened over time. As people got to know one another, and engaged in private conversations (through the study pairs or during breaks) relationships grew that contributed to members' ability to talk frankly. Jim admitted to his group during the last session's conversation:

I felt very comfortable with everybody as far as this group. That I could pretty much say anything to you and this was how I feel about it. And I feel real good about that. And I've really learned a great deal about...[Starting again with renewed emphasis] A lot of it's on how you approach your faith, and how you, you know, you're very deep with it; which I think is just wonderful. (Session H)

In this account Jim is comparing the experience of this group with his prior experiences of trying to talk about faith and religion, which he named as immature and contentious. In a later interview Jim noted that disagreements in the class setting did arise, but "you still had such respect for the other person" (Int. 3).

Instances of group members asking questions of one another, in search of greater understanding, can be found throughout the session transcripts. Some questions were quite simple, but ones they had never been able to ask prior to this setting. Max was particularly good at asking questions, as he did in the discussion on Resurrection with Linda:

Max: [addressing Linda] I hear the words so often, but I don't understand them:
He died for us.

[And later]

Max: That is confusing to me. You said God sent his son, then you say God is the same.

[And still later]

Max: [trying again] Is the reason that the...do you believe the reason that Jesus lived at that time...or what was his task to do? And why did it end? Or did it end? Or did it not end?

Linda: Jesus came to save us. He was the messiah. He is the messiah. He came to save us.

Max: To fix the whole world?

Linda: Yeah. To save the world. (Session C)

In his journal Max later commented:

During our last class, the Catholic members shared their views on the impact of the Resurrection on their life. It was the first time I had discussed such a basic theological premise with a member of a different faith. Previous discussions I had

with members of the Catholic faith were “safer” as they related to ritual and practice. (Journal 2)

I do not wish to suggest that complete comprehension between participants came about through their discussions. What I am noting is that they attest that they were able to attempt understanding. As Max said, concepts were “difficult for me to grasp” but it was a rare opportunity to ask about them (Journal 2).

Limitations include avoiding controversy and defense mechanisms – As successful as the eight weeks of conversation were, a few participants noted that controversial topics were avoided. When I asked for examples of what those might be, and whether this group would have been able to handle them, and whether that would have been a productive conversation for this group, I got various responses. Elaine noted we had never talked about the State of Israel:

Elaine: It never came up at all and I think this was partly because we were very obedient. If we were told to talk about ‘x’ we didn’t talk about ‘y’. But I think another reason was that people did not want to in any way insult the other group....

T.: Let me ask you this question. We’ve met for eight sessions and it probably would have been very difficult to talk about this topic or any other that would have been perceived as controversial early on. But do you think now that the feeling in the group is such now that it could maintain a good conversation on more controversial topics?

Elaine: I think it would be worth trying. I think this group could handle it. I really do. I don’t know about going into *any* mixed group and saying, “Okay we’re going to discuss this in a decent manner.” (Evaluation)

Throughout the group discussions Elaine listened respectfully, asked very direct questions and spoke clearly from her own perspective. As she indicates in her own words above, she respected the process and appreciated that in the other group members.

A different response came from Howard, whose concern was around belief in the person of Jesus. The following exchange comes from his second interview:

T.: Let me go back to something you were saying earlier about the conversation and the tendency towards non-controversial things, or I should say, that was your own terminology. I want to ask you, do you think there would be a benefit, a learning of any kind, to have the Catholics inquire of the Jews, What do you believe about Jesus? Do you think there would have been a learning in that? [he tries to answer before I’ve finished asking, but I continue and he stops.] Part of it is considering the limitations of time in any given session.

Howard: I guess the answer that I have to give is, No, there would not be a benefit. And the reason for it not being a benefit is that we’re not comfortable enough with each other and each other’s faith to bring up those matters yet.

We're a beginning learning group. And we haven't, what do they say? In conversation you never discuss religion and politics.

[A bit further along]

Howard: As far as I see it. No...sometimes I feel that it's like walking on water - you don't want to get too deep. You don't want to cause any controversy yet. If a question arose in the group - like a question and I said, "Well I don't believe in resurrection." What would that do? I'm not looking at it from me, cuz of the Catholics in the group. How can you not believe in it? What do you believe? There are all kinds of answers that could be... [having a tough time finishing his thought coherently] I don't bring up that kind of question, in other words, that's a statement.

[Later in the same interview]

T.: So if you were to ask questions or make statements, as you say, playing by your own rules, you're perceiving it would be disruptive? How so?

Howard: Well, because,...when a person has a belief and this is the way they have been brought up, this is their way of life, any challenge to that belief can create anger or distaste or shutting off. So if I said to someone, I don't believe in the resurrection, give me proof of the resurrection.

T.: Do you think members of this group would find that disruptive?

Howard: Yeah, yeah. But I don't know enough about where this group is coming from. What their own church studies are like. ...Where's this whole group coming from? They're coming from years of doing this in their homes, in the church.

And...they have a strong faith, and I certainly don't want to disrupt their feelings about their faith. There are questions I could ask of a Catholic scholar, and that's why the videos are good. But I can't ask the others. I don't know them well enough in terms of what their degree of study has been within the church itself.

In the interviews Howard consistently talked about the avoidance of difficult topics, particularly Jews' non-belief in Jesus as the Christ. He also noted that there was not enough time to go into depth on these questions. Yet by his own admission he avoided asking such questions.

Interestingly, in the group discussions it was Howard who consistently side-tracked the main conversation by "teaching" about Judaism and sometimes even about Christianity! It was also Howard who had the greatest difficulty talking in the first person and had to be frequently reminded to do so by Betty. I name these observations because I believe Howard's tendency to self-edit was more inspired by his own discomfort with the potential direction of conversation than by any real discomfort among members of his group. His tendency to teach I believe was inspired in part by his desire to inform, but it also kept the discussion from moving to a deeper level – something he said he desired.

Finally I note that as time went on it became possible for me to see that several members had defense mechanisms that they seemed to call into play when they were feeling discomfort. It was also interesting to note when other group members would attempt to keep the conversation on track despite these defensive efforts.

2. The Conversational Relationship Grounds Learning About the Other

As noted above, several class members knew one another prior to the course's start, and several had relationships outside of the class with members of the other tradition. However, the course was designed so that class members would have a significant amount of time to interact, formally and informally, so that conversational relationships might develop around the topics of faith and practice. It was expected that to some degree the topics under discussion, as well as the 'ground rules' followed, in the group discussions would extend to private conversations during breaks and transitions.

In the final evaluation I asked each member to name their greatest learning about the other tradition and I asked to what they could attribute that learning – presentations or having met the others. The majority of participants responded that while the presentations were very valuable for learning about the others, it was the opportunity to meet real people that made the stronger impression. Although it may come as no surprise that greater learning happened because of relationships, it is important to remember that all but one class member had a prior relationship with a person of the other tradition – although some relationships were closer than others.

So the question remains, What made the relationships formed in this setting different from those prior relationships, such that they would impact learning as they did? The quick answer to that question is that no one in the class had previously had the opportunity to talk in depth with someone from the other tradition about their belief and practice, as attested to in their intake surveys. As was oft repeated by class members: In polite company you don't talk about religion and politics. As Patricia shared in her evaluation: "I'm glad that was not the case on Wednesday nights at Beth Israel and Holy Name."

As indicated in the final evaluations, *Video presentations* and *Live presentations* received very high marks: 10 out of 14, and 13 out of 14, respectively, marked "Very valuable". Likewise, the *Articles* read by the group were also rated "Very valuable" in 10 out of 14 evaluations. The information taken from these three sources provided the basis of discussions in the small groups. The group appreciated the scholarly, balanced and professional manner of these sources, which allowed them to speak from a more informed position. However, it was the presence of the other and greater familiarity with their belief and practice that grounded information gleaned from the sources.

The conversational relationship contextualizes the 'teaching' about the other and gives it value – I offer two examples of this phenomenon – one Jewish, one Catholic. Elaine has had Catholic friends since her high school days, and they remain important friends. She had also heard at some point about the Second Vatican Council, but she had no real understanding of what it meant for Catholics. In this class the videos spoke often about the Council and its impact on Catholic life. Particular attention was given to the document *Nostra Aetate*, the Council document on the Church's relationship with non-Christian religions. The class members also had a chance to read sections of that document for themselves. In class this document was

considered in the context of the Church's long-standing teaching of anti-Judaism and supersessionism.¹²

Like most of the class members, Elaine was unfamiliar with the concept of anti-Judaism, while she was quite familiar with anti-Semitism.¹³ In the second session, when she heard the distinction she questioned whether it mattered, "It all comes down to Christians hating Jews." She found the theological foundations for hatred very disturbing and had not realized that there was "so much anti-Judaism in scripture and prayer."

It is in light of that learning that she found the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* so revolutionary; and in the final evaluation she named that as her greatest learning. From the class discussions she could see what a major step *Nostra Aetate* was for the Church and how it affected the life of the Catholics she met. She marveled that her early relationships with Catholics in high school and college could exist at all, given the Church's attitude towards Jews. And she was really impressed by the great desire of the Catholics she met in class to understand Jews. She had "a sense of the Catholics trying harder than the Jews for understanding. They were very earnest" (Final eval.). For Elaine, the presentations and readings offered information on the Catholic Church's drastic change vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism, but it was the extensive conversation with the Catholics, who talked of "how they were taught" and demonstrated their present desire for understanding, that made the changes both more dramatic and believable.

The second example comes from Jim, a self-professed lover of history, particularly military history. He does a lot of reading in that area. Likewise he does a lot of study of Church teachings – perhaps more than any other class member. In the first interview we had the following exchange:

T.: Do you think learning anything about Judaism and being with Jews while you're studying, will have any impact on your understanding of your own Christian belief?

Jim: Yes, I do. I think that learning about any religion in a lot of ways can, in some ways, either make you see things a little bit differently. I'm not saying that it would ever change my ideas on a Catholic faith, because I really don't have any. I don't have anything I really struggle with in the Catholic faith. Any time I that have anything that I question I either go to a higher authority and ask the question or look it up somewhere and ask why. And I've never had any kind of argument on anything like that. (Inter. 1)

¹² Supersessionism refers to the understanding that with the coming of Christ, the Christian community has superseded Israel as the inheritor of God's saving covenant. The teaching of anti-Judaism follows on that, purporting that Jewish belief and practice are inadequate for salvation and even degenerate. Evidence for both teachings can be found as early as the end of the first century of the Common Era. See Philip A. Cunningham, *Education for Shalom* (Philadelphia: American Interfaith Institute, 1995).

¹³ The distinction being that anti-Judaism is based on a disagreement of religious belief – once changed in a person (i.e., accepting Jesus as the Christ), he or she was made acceptable. Anti-Semitism is founded on racial difference, classifying someone as racially inferior and impervious to change; it is a modern concept, dependent upon modern 'pseudo-scientific' understandings of race.

For the second session of the course the class read two chapters of Marc Sapersteins' *Moments of Crisis in Jewish-Christian Relations* on the history of relations from the 1st to the 16th centuries of the Common Era.¹⁴ I was concerned that Jim would find disturbing the clash between what he had previously known of the Church's history and behavior and what he read here. I also wanted to see if he would take it seriously or dismiss it. I was watchful of his reaction.

In class, when talking in the all-Catholic group Jim admitted to finding the history distressing, but notice, he also tries not to judge the Church's actions:

Betty: I commiserated with what you [Caroline] felt about the guilt, but felt it very heavy. [Jim], you felt guilt too?

Jim: Yeah. It's hard for me to even read things like that because I'm sitting there and I'm reading and I say, I know this took place, but do I have to go through this again [Said with a shying away kind of action in his face and voice]? You know? And I read it and it is that weight of, I can't believe we did this, type thing. You know? And it's very hard to compare eras [Agreement from Alice]. I mean, we weren't there, we don't know the situation. (Session B)

In a following interview I asked Jim if he had been at all familiar with the history. He admitted that he was not surprised by it, but "I guess I'm guilty of kinda avoiding things like that because I'm always very afraid it's going to tarnish my image of the Church." I asked him if it made a difference in his reading the assignment that half the class was Jewish. He responded:

Yes, every single line. I would read a line or a paragraph and I would kinda put it down and go, [Intake of breath] Oh, man what are they going to think about? [Laughter] I thought I was going to go into that next class and they could have either been pointing at me, or saying, What did you do? Or look at this. I thought it was going to be a pretty rowdy class after that. (Inter. 2)

The class did not turn out that way. Jim attributes it to the fact that the history was not so much of a surprise to the Jewish members as it was to him.

As we continued to talk on the subject he admitted to going back and forth between wanting to leave the history buried and bringing it out for all to see. When asked how knowing the history has affected him personally he responded:

I think that it kinda, it would have... I don't think I'll particularly look at a Jewish person quite the same, in the same manner. I think that...What's hard for me, I don't think everybody goes through this but, now any time I think that I look at a Jewish person that will always enter my head. Things like that will always enter my head. Um...and that's just the way I am with things. (Inter. 2)

¹⁴ Marc Saperstein, *Moments of Crisis in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

By the time this interview was conducted Jim had already made some nice connections with Jewish members of the class, and references to them fill that same interview. Although Jim had once had a girlfriend who was a non-observant Jew, he admits to never really knowing Judaism or a Jewish person well. Most of his contacts were through business, and were not very positive. I would suggest that for Jim studying this disturbing material in the presence of Jews, who he was coming to know and respect and who were reading the same material, made it difficult for him to ignore it. Although he does not know what he will do with the information, he says it has changed the way he sees Jews.

For both Elaine and Jim, the presence of the other contextualized what they were learning about the other, gave it breadth and texture, but also value. The information was not simply about “those people” but about classmates whose voices and stories they have heard and appreciated.

The encounter raises awareness of differences and similarities – The prior example draws on material that was part of the curriculum. Yet very often the learning was not directly planned, but came about simply because people were together. These learnings were usually drawn from impressions that the two groups made on one another and often revolved around differences and similarities between the two groups. I say two groups, because although one or two people may have been particularly good exemplars of the behavior observed, very often the impression was attributed to the group of Jews or Catholics at large.

Examples of such learning were named in the final evaluations when participants were asked if their impression of the other tradition had changed. In most cases those new impressions did not directly reflect the curriculum of the course, but were fruits of the conversational encounter. Some examples follow:

From Caroline: “Primarily the facets of study... The different ways people found expression to their faith... And I thought a lot about the Hebrew, learning so much in Hebrew. And I was really interested in how even, not just the rabbi, the other members of the group would say things, and would say, “In Hebrew we call it such and such. And it's not exactly this” And they would use that right in their conversation trying to explain things to us, and I thought the richness of the Hebrew instead of this really hard thing to have to learn another language. And I remember having classmates who had to go to Hebrew school and I never realized how rich it was.”

Alice was “astounded by their piety and adherence to all the regulations - even more so than we are.”

From Patricia: “I had no idea that they were so different!”

From Howard: “I think I have a greater understanding of the...passion of the Catholic members.... Really their real involvement.”

Gladys found there was more sharing and more openness than she had expected. “They are very interested. Maybe their views were different, but they were still trying to understand...I felt like it was a new beginning...you could feel very comfortable.”

From Frances: “You know one thing that struck me, and this is me again, I've always had, I think we as Catholics figure that nobody else prays. We have the emphasis on prayer. Other people do too. And I was impressed with Nathan and his talk about envisioning what he needed to do with his life. And you don't think of that with other people. We're kind of cloistered.”

T.: “And prayer is a part of that?”

Frances: “And prayer life was a big part of that. And particularly of people you don't expect it of. That's dumb isn't it? But it's a good learning thing.”

From Elaine: “I was interested in the faith that the Catholics members had. I think that they are more spiritual and more people of faith than the Jewish people are. I think, um, the Jewish people, um, it's hard for me to speak for all of them, but my sense was that a real belief in the faith in God, in that kind of spiritual concept is stronger among the Catholics people than in the Jewish. I think the Jewish people, um, it's more a kind of ‘practical’ religion. Following the rules to some extent. Um. You know having this ethical sense of what the Ten Commandments say about leading a good, or righteous life. But I think it's less spiritual than the Catholics.”

T.: “You knew that because it was demonstrated in the lives of the people you were actually meeting?”

Elaine: “Yeah. Yeah. Right.”

From Kelly: “I think the most valuable thing I learned was that in the Jewish tradition it's more based on reading and studying, and the family based religion. Whereas we are more church based.”

Note that none of these topics were directly attended to in the curriculum of *Walking God's Paths*. They were drawn from the encounters that the participants had with one another. It should also be noted that a few of these revelations come to people who have had long-standing prior relationships with people of the other tradition, but this is the first time they are seeing these things.

A Case of Mistaken Identity – Although these learnings and impressions are real it has to be remembered that this was only an eight session course, with some opportunity for people to meet outside of class time (Some had invited one another to worship services and meals). That being said, I want to point out that some of these learnings about one another lack nuance. Not all Jews are great students of their tradition; not all Catholics have strong belief in Jesus. So some of the attributions may be off the mark, if only slightly. What is to be appreciated here is that the various differences named here were previously unrecognized by the class members.

Even those who had known members of the other tradition prior to this class had new things to learn about the other – things they had never recognized before.

3. Conversation with the Other Spurs Self-Awareness

The dynamic of conversation across a religious boundary is created in large part out of interest in the other, and a reciprocal desire to make oneself and one's tradition understood. Although the rabbi and I served as the official teachers of the course, every class member was to some degree, a teacher of their tradition. The number of participants within the group lessened the responsibility of any one person to feel that they were the primary representatives, and some took on more of a teaching role than any other members. Yet all members seemed to appreciate that they were representing their tradition, or at least an interpretation (my word) of their tradition. By the same token, everyone expected to be learning primarily about the other tradition, and less about their own. However the data indicate that the process of coming to know about the other, and sharing about oneself spurs self-awareness.

Conversation stirs prejudices and stereotypes – Coming to know who the other really is not only raises awareness about the other, it also brings to consciousness pre-understandings¹⁵ or latent stereotypes held about the other. For a group of adults of such good will and earnest intent it may be a slow process – and an embarrassing one – to acknowledge that they have held negative stereotypes about each other.

Interestingly enough, *Walking God's Paths* held the discussion on stereotypes between the traditions until the last session. It seems the producers of the program appreciated the same thing – it takes time, and a degree of comfort, for people of good will to see and admit that they hold stereotypes about one another. After viewing the video presentation on stereotypes, the larger group met in two small faith-alike groups. This was only the second time this group formation was used (the first time was in Session B when they shared their reactions to the historical lessons). Although all members knew one another in their small group, some admitted later that they were, at this point, more comfortable in their established faith-different groups. As well, a few people admitted that it was the most difficult conversation of all they had.¹⁶

In this group setting, and as a result of this course, participants began to see and admit to knowing and holding negative stereotypes about the other group. The best examples come from the Jewish group, which I believe can be attributed to the rabbi's persistence in facilitation on this occasion. Elaine was the first to turn the discussion to stereotypes Jews held about Christians. Once she had started the others joined in, focusing particularly on the word "Goy" and "goyish," for which they built a definition: "lacking class, lacking education" (Max); "drunkard" (Izzy); "stupid" (Gladys). This exchange even prompted Izzy to share a Yiddish folk song, which started "The drunkard is a Goy." While doing so she attempted to shield my microphone.

¹⁵ I use the terms 'pre-understanding' and 'prejudice' in the manner of Hans-Georg Gadamer. They are not something wrong or right in themselves, but have to be acknowledged in that they frame expectations. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000).

¹⁶ This was reported in the final evaluations of Izzy, Gladys and Elaine.

The rabbi pushed the group, asking if they held any of these stereotypes themselves and whether having met eight Catholics in this group had any impact on those stereotypes. Max was the first to admit to the group that he has held a stereotype. He exhibited some discomfort in doing so, hesitating significantly in his speech when he turns to talk for himself:

Max: I'm saying that's a stereotype, that you can't really...they might be nice on the outside, but you put a couple of drinks in them and you will hear how they really feel about Jews. And that's, that's a, um... I think that is a stereotype that Jews have.

Rabbi: Can you own that stereotype? Honestly?

Max: Can I...? I don't, um... I think I came in with more suspicion, um... about what, what, um... is the theological belief that Catholics have about Jews, um.... So I mean I do think that that's changed a bit. (Session H)

It is important to appreciate that Max has had more significant interaction prior to this course with Catholics than most of the others (as indicated in his intake survey and journal entries), but it is here that he admits that he has been suspicious of them and their tradition.

Likewise, Howard comes to admit holding a similar stereotype, and he also admits his discomfort with holding it, feeling it contrary to how he views himself:

I have a slightly,... I guess I'm confused. I can accept Catholicism easily as a faith religion. It doesn't mean I can accept all Catholics, just like I can't accept all purples or yellows or greens. ...and, um, I have found that I have stereotypes and I do feel you scratch a goyim and you do find, *most of the time*, someone who is anti-Semitic. Why? Again, I think of xenophobia, fear of difference that we never can get to know anything else as well as we know ourselves, and we can't know ourselves till... And I think I'm a very liberal person and yet I still have certain...[Leaves sentence unfinished]. (Session B)

Unlike Max, Howard has had no significant interaction with Catholics before this course, although he has had interactions with other Christians through his work. His admission comes late in the conversation, throughout which he has tried to explain in general terms why people hold prejudices, as he does again here.

Izzy too exhibits a prejudice against the Christian tradition, but not against particular individuals. She exhibits this in less direct ways. In the first session she wishes to simply say, "People are people." Yet in response to the second session on the shared history she asks, "Why do I have to know about someone's tradition in order to respect him?" – a strange response from someone enrolled in a class on dialogue. It is in her final evaluation that she gives some thought to what is going on for her:

Izzy: The [most valuable] experience was the eagerness of the group to cooperate. It was a nice warm feeling.

T. Was that a surprise to you? Warmer than you thought it would be?

Izzy: No. Because a lot of this has always been individual. But you might say, what I've learned from this is that this is the first time I've learned that the Church is making any effort in this direction. And I think that's valuable. It's a monumental task [Laughter]. And I was delighted to know that this is happening... So this new attitude - not so much the new attitude of people, because individuals, that's always been, but depending on which individual - but to see that the church is doing this and to see that there's some involvement. You know, how feasible this will be we don't know, but that somebody's trying....
(Final eval.)

Izzy's expectation for the course was that Catholics would overcome the barriers put up by their church. She did not expect that the Church itself would initiate openness.

For the Catholics, admission to holding stereotypes about Jews did not arise in the parallel discussion in their faith-alike groups, but in the final evaluations. When asked what her most significant learning in the course had been, Caroline responds that she had held the stereotype, mostly unconsciously, that the Jewish faith had not changed since the time of Jesus, and through the course that got challenged:

I don't think I thought a lot about it, but that's exactly what I thought. I thought it was the same religion. So over the course of those eight weeks, that's what struck me the most was what the religion is, these many facets. These many facets that I was unaware of. (Final eval.)

She goes on in that same interview to talk about how impressed she was with the richness of the religious expression she found among the Jewish participants. That the Hebrew language, that she had previously considered a chore to learn, was in fact a dynamic and rich resource of religious understanding and expression.

The examples offered here of prejudices coming to light in the conversation are the strongest ones, in that they are all admitted to by their owners, and that they are mostly negative. Prejudices or pre-understandings are not always negative, but they are expectations that to some degree restrict what one is able to see and hear. There are several more subtle instances found in the group conversations and in the interviews that show participants being moved 'outside their box' in terms of what they hear from and about the other. My point here is not that all prejudices and pre-understandings are corrected in this setting of conversation, but that they are more likely to be brought to light, particularly the unconsciously held prejudices, as the workings of participants' imaginations meet the reality of others' lives.

The recognition of real differences focuses attention on one's own religious identity
– Hand in hand with the appreciation of who people really are comes a deepening understanding of oneself. Differences come to light as just that, differences. They bring to light religious ideas or practices that one holds uniquely that previously may have been assumed, even unconsciously, to be universal.

A good example of this happening comes from Max and Jim who worked as a pair (Hevruta) briefly studying a passage from *Isaiah*. Although the passage is familiar to both of them prior to this meeting, when they look at it together they appreciate immediately that they are each approaching it differently. This is the beginning of their exchange:

Max: [Starting off] It is just what speaks to you. What hits you. Your perspective. It's interesting. I read it that it's very personal. That, uh, that, we were, *I* was appointed as an agent of the Lord and have a responsibility. So I view it personally. You're viewing it, as...[Hesitation] Let me ask you. You, you say you hear Jesus saying it?

Jim: I can picture him kinda saying something like this, in a way.

Max: [With hesitation] And what would the teaching be if he was saying it? To people? To...

Jim: Um... you know, he, like for example, "He made my mouth like a sharpened blade," kinda like the way he would speak. Um... "Like a polished arrow," kinda like he was pure. For example, um... let's see. You know, it's really interesting how [Laughing], it is true what it says in the video [we've just seen], how I relate it like that and you relate it...It is interesting.

Max: Right, right. So is it...[Pausing]

Jim: But I can see, I can absolutely see it, you know if you look at it, in, in the context that you're looking at, he would be talking about, or God would be speaking in a sense of you relating it to yourself. I can definitely see that.

(Session E)

The exchange goes on in a similar vein for the duration and when they share their experience with the rest of their group Max points to this difference in interpretation:

Jim and I were reading it and we came from *almost* two different perspectives. And I don't want to speak for Jim, but Jim, um... heard the words of Jesus, saying these words, as kind of, as teaching. He said, "I could hear him saying this." I took it from a more personal point of view being directed to me, that God was saying these words to me. And we just read it from our own perspectives. Which was interesting. (Session E)

Granted, in the short time they had together neither Max nor Jim got a deep understanding of what the other understood in the text, nor how it was interpreted fully in the other's tradition. What they did get was an appreciation simply that it *was* interpreted differently by the other. Later they both speak to this experience of coming to see the difference of the other as pointing to their own position.

In a group discussion in the final class, in response to the statement "We will really only understand ourselves as we understand the other," Max replies:

I think the benefit of learning about somebody else is that it stretches your own norm. It challenges you and forces you to think about things that you've taken for

granted. So you're forced to learn about them. And sometimes if you've just taken things for granted always, then you don't really know. I think it was you Linda, when you were talking about resurrection and you said it was, you kind of welcomed that opportunity to think about ...and it was, it got you to think about things in a different way, or in a way you hadn't thought of in a while. And I think that has been nice. For I know that's what has happened for me too; I'm forced to look at my own beliefs. (Session H)

And later in his final evaluation, Max talked about the value of seeing the other simply to understand and appreciate oneself more. He said it "has definitely enhanced my comfort with who I am" and when you learn about others you "go back to your own comfy chair, your chair sometimes feels more comfortable. It gives you the opportunity to see things differently."

Likewise in an interview, Jim spoke of the Hevruta work with Max as heightening his own sense of difference:

Jim: It was very interesting. [Laughter] Seeing both sides of it. Seeing the reading from a different angle. I guess I just never really thought of it that way. You read something and I just either pertain it to, you know, something in the Bible, I immediately think Christ, or I, you know, and they look at it differently. Just like it said in the television program we saw on that. It's, I don't know, it's just different. I don't know.

T.: Did it offer a new possibility for you? Because you said something to the effect, when the larger group got together, I don't know if I'll look at text from the Hebrew scripture and think it has only that one meaning now. You said something like that.

Jim: I think this whole, this whole class has really changed me in the effect that I'm not going to look at things in the same way anymore. I'm kinda wanting to see it the way a Jewish person would see it, the way an atheist would see it, and the way maybe a Baptist would see it. I'm going to kinda look at it from a lot of different fronts now. And I just feel that I think basically so that it would kinda open me up a little more to the way someone else would look at it. I think I was always reading anything...one-sided in a way, and that really did affect me. It really did change me in that sense. And that's a good thing. I don't know, it was really good hearing someone else seeing it from a different angle. (Interview two)

Again, I am not suggesting that the engagement with the other reveals a full understanding of the other – or even of oneself – but that it offers the opportunity to be aware that one's own perspective has edges, and what those might be.

Conversation across difference heightens 'ownership' of the tradition – Part of recognizing one's own religious identity is coming to see its 'edges,' those parts that are unique to the tradition and not shared by others. This is particularly poignant when that uniqueness is something central to the tradition, or something those outside the tradition would consider a marker of the tradition. In dialogue across religious difference there is the opportunity to

recognize uniqueness and perhaps come to terms with it because of the questioning that comes from outside.

The best examples of this came through the opportunities we created in the course for each group to express their personal understanding and appreciation of a central element of their tradition. For the Catholics it was the belief in the resurrection of Jesus. For the Jews it was the concept of chosenness. They were attended to in separate sessions, so it was understood in each that those who were sharing out of their tradition would do the most talking in that group discussion. The others were encouraged to ask questions, but the primary effort was to be on the part of those who were prepared to speak for themselves out of their tradition. On both occasions the group was given at least a week to think about and prepare their responses.

The exchanges were enlightening, not necessarily for what was shared, but for the degree of struggle by each group in articulating across the divide about something that was distinct in their tradition and not shared with the other. I will say more about that effort of articulation below. Here I would like to point to an awareness on the part of the participants to 'own' this element of their tradition, in large part because they see that *others* see it as central and somehow, as difficult as it is, they have to take that into consideration.

Although both faith-specific discussions illustrate this need to come to grips with a unique element of one's own tradition, a good example comes out of one group's very lively exchange on the Jewish concept of 'chosenness.' The Jewish members, exhibited here in Elaine's comments, were consistently trying to both explain and downplay its importance in their own understanding of Judaism.

Elaine: Well first of all it's always been a concept that has kind of irritated me, because, um, I don't really think that my religion, one of its main objects is to set me above other people. I just have trouble with that.

Betty: So chosenness does mean something to each of you - correct me if I'm not interpreting correctly. That it gives you a sense of responsibility, commitment...
Howard: Obligation.

Elaine: I would say that's the way I interpret this [Biblical] passage, but I actually am using that as kind of an excuse. I really don't care for this particular statement. It's there and I don't want to really say I disagree, but the only way I can interpret it not that I'm really chosen but that I have some responsibility. Of all the Jewish things I would say this is kind of far down on my list of things that I consider important.

Elaine: And the other thing that you have to understand - I may be very wrong, I don't know - but all Jews don't believe that this word, the Bible actually came from God. You know, that it was actually written by God. So therefore, its holiness has different meanings for different peoples. For example I believe that this came about from different people writing their stories, and somebody got this in about the chosen and I personally don't think it's that important. (Session G)

There is an effort here to disassociate themselves from the concept, while at the same time trying to explain how they interpret it. Notice that part of the effort on Elaine's part is to nuance the interpretation of the Biblical passage that spoke of chosenness.

Towards the end of the discussion Nathan finally speaks to why they might wish to disassociate themselves from it by explaining, "This chosenness theory has been one of the causes of anti-Semitism. Because non-Jews says, You're pretty fancy; you think you're better than everyone else." And adding, "We don't feel that chosenness is an important part of our practice of Judaism." His comments bring to light a compelling reason for Jews to put aside this concept. While the Catholic members seemed to appreciate that point, they still wanted to understand chosenness and the role it plays for the Jews, demonstrated in the fact that this was one of the most lively and intense conversations of the whole eight weeks.

Kelly joined Betty in pushing the discussion. She talked of the experience later in her final interview, saying:

But it was interesting that they are denying that they are chosen, and that they said it, which, I don't care that they are the chosen ones, it's just that they are going out of their way to say, No, no. We're not. And I say, Yeah, yeah. You were.
(laughter) It's okay, it's all right. Somebody had to be chosen.

And later in that same interview, when I asked about her persistent line of questioning she responded:

[They] said, but, we're not a race. I said, Okay, fine, but you're viewed as, you know I can be viewed as Irish and French, but very often if you ask someone who is Jewish what they are, they say, Jewish. They don't say...Polish and Russian. They say, I'm Jewish. So that's how I was viewing the part of, I didn't know, how else to say it other than a genetic or a racial thing. Because I wanted to find out because they're pooh-poohing this chosen bit and yet, their one reason for being, and this is not sounding right, but their one identification, their primary identification is that they are Jewish. And I don't think that that's necessarily true of many other groups.

Kelly was trying hard to understand what the Jewish members meant, but she was surprised by their efforts to disassociate themselves from what she had understood as central to the Jewish tradition.

In her final evaluation Elaine admitted that she was struck by the fact that the Jews had been asked to speak to 'chosenness.' She recognized that the very fact that it was asked, and inspired such lively discussion in the group, means that it is important *outside* the Jewish community and for that reason, she had to give it serious consideration:

The fact that you presented it as a question was of interest to me, because that means you must have felt this was a major topic to consider. Where in my

concept of Judaism, it's not that I've never heard of it before, but it's something that just doesn't appeal to me and I don't really think about, as a concept of Judaism.

The question itself heightened awareness for Elaine and the other Jewish members of that group of this element of identity. As uncomfortable the concept made them, the process of being questioned about it in this setting required them to give it serious consideration.

I am not suggesting that either the Jewish members or the Catholics have to – or would be able to – provide an explanation that is satisfactory to those outside their tradition about elements unique to their traditions. Nor am I suggesting that upon examination these elements are something that members of a tradition wish to hold closely – as was the case in the chosenness discussion. What I am saying is that traditions are perceived by those outside them (well or poorly) as having unique characteristics. Those same characteristics may go unnoticed or un-discussed within the tradition simply because their presence is assumed by its members. It can happen, as happened here in both the resurrection and the chosenness discussions, that members have to become aware of and confront these unique characteristics simply because the other asks.

Efforts at articulation instigate personal understanding – Of course, wanting to respond to questions and being able to are quite different matters. As participants began to articulate their religious belief to one another, and to see that there are distinct differences between their traditions and perspectives, all were challenged in the effort to make themselves understood by the other. Most participants found the effort done in a group helpful to their own efforts, in that other members of the same tradition helped fill out the issue more fully than they would alone. As Kelly said:

Everybody added a different aspect of [the resurrection]. Nothing, there was nothing you disagreed with, it was just that they were looking at it from this side of the picture [Gesturing] and somebody else was here [Gesturing] and I was here, and you know everybody. And we kinda filled it in so that it was an almost complete - because I don't want to say it is complete because if another person added theirs then it would be complete. (Inter. 2)

Likewise, Alice in her final evaluation offered, “Listening to others made you think more on the questions.”

However sometimes the participants felt ‘over their heads’ trying to explain something they realized they had not fully understood themselves and perhaps had never really thought about. This exchange comes from Frances’ final evaluation:

Frances: It's just to try to formulate what you're trying to say [about the resurrection], and even though I had thought about it ahead of time, but when it actually comes to doing it. Of course as Izzy and I were both saying, you know you do things in your faith for years and years and years, and you never think

about [Pause] why. So to have somebody ask you “Why?”, and specific questions as to why...

T.: I remember you saying to people a few time: “Well you just don't think about these things.”

Frances: Well you don't, you really don't. You just lead your life, and mostly I think you think about the Gospel more than you do the specific...like the resurrection. I mean that kinda floored me, really. Because I don't think I ever think about what the resurrection is, even though you accept it. Then to explain it. Then Nathan's saying, “Well you know they wrote these things 30 or 40 years later.” And I thought, “Well that's true.” And he goes, “What's your answer to that?” And you go, “Blah, blub, blub” [Laughter]. Because you accept them, and have for years, they are part of your heritage, part of your belief system. But to actually explain it.... You can discuss it with someone who actually has the same belief, but even that is a little difficult. Because, I don't know, you just don't...like I said, you just don't think about it. Consequently it's hard to articulate, like you say. (Final eval.)

Frances' self-deprecating manner allowed for the most candid and humorous reaction to this challenge, but others found the same difficulty.

In reflection on the same discussion of the resurrection, Jim admitted in his interview that he let himself get side-tracked into the historical realities of Roman soldiering and that this got him away from the harder task of talking directly to the question.

Jim: And you know, getting into this, here I am I'm sitting there and I'm sweating, and I'm like, My God, what am I doing? And I'm talking about this, and they're all looking at me going, Oh, my, we don't even know what he's talking about. [Laughter]

T. You're thinking at the time your talking, I shouldn't be...

Jim: [Interrupting] I was running at the mouth. [Laughter] I was, I was... Sometimes I get going and I can't stop and I get passionate about it, and I'm talking about this and talking about that...And afterwards I'm saying to myself, Wait, these people don't even know what I'm talking about. I'm just getting into this stuff, and I don't know. [Laughter] But...I think the week after, I thought, What was I thinking? (Int. 2)

The Catholic members of the group often expressed frustration that their level of education in Catholicism did not match that of the Jewish members in Judaism. They felt challenged to speak well and represent their tradition well to their Jewish classmates. When I asked them about their efforts to make sense of their tradition to others, most indicated a frustration with not knowing their tradition well enough, not problems with internalizing the tradition itself. There were few instances of people demonstrating a more critical appropriation of their tradition and its teachings. They were simply pleased if they were able to represent their tradition adequately.

Overall there were few instances of participants critically reflecting on aspects of their tradition – Jewish or Catholic. What was happening through the process of articulation was that a greater awareness of each one’s own tradition was arising. I close this section with a comment Max shared in his second journal entry:

This whole experience has made me appreciate my own traditions. I spoke with pride about my beliefs and practices. Being in a position to articulate thoughts and beliefs provided me with opportunity to grapple with an appreciate my own traditions. (Journal 2)

Concluding discussion

The study started with the question: How does conversation across religious difference contribute to the examination and formation of religious identity? That question arose out of the experience of people with significant experience in interreligious dialogue and/or theological formation. Having investigated the data from this study involving people with little such experience, I would say that there was some reflection on religious identity. However, prior to any “examination and formation” there are preliminary steps for the basic congregation member. The first is that they learn how to have a conversation across religious difference. The second is that they get to know one another, and that frames the whole learning experience. The third is that prior to examining and forming religious identity participants are made aware of *actually holding* elements that make up such an identity.

All the members of this class were people for whom religious identity was central to their lives and their personal identity when they entered the process. However, that does not mean that at the start of the process they were fully conscious of basic elements of their respective religious traditions in such a way that they could reflect on them critically, and thus examine and form them consciously. However, the process of conversation that they learned in the course assisted them to not only talk across a religious divide and learn about another tradition. It also forced them to see some elements of their own traditions and to grapple with the concepts themselves so that they could speak of them in the group. I would suggest that this is how the process of examination and formation starts, with self-awareness. This setting provided a place for that to happen effectively.

In the final evaluations, when asked if they had learned much about their own traditions in the process of the course, most participants indicated that that learning had not been significant.¹⁷ On the other hand, they were very impressed with how much they learned about the other. They were also greatly impressed with the relationships that they had made. In fact it should be mentioned that the class has continued to meet four time throughout the summer months and they hope we can continue the process into the Fall of 2004.

¹⁷ This response is interesting considering the amount of new material each group received about their own tradition. Their response may be reflecting the greater amount they learned about the other. It may also reflect a desire to present themselves as informed about their own tradition to me in the final evaluation.

I finish this analysis of dialogue across religious difference for congregation members by reflecting on that last point in light of my own experience as an adult educator. Never in my rather extensive career of teaching at the congregational level have I met such commitment on the part of the participants. The late nights (we finished at 9:30PM), the preparation (there was usually reading required), and the demanding schedule (missed sessions were rare, even when it demanded significant effort on some people's part) did not deter people from not only finishing the course, but also demanding some continuation. Their ongoing commitment to the process alone indicates something significant happened in this course. I believe the 'what' is tied directly to the three themes found in this data: the opportunity for productive conversation; the chance to learn with one another adding significance to what is learned; and the opening up of their own awareness and understanding of their own traditions. This is where their commitment starts.

If we are to understand the dynamics of dialogue across religious difference, much more study remains. For example, a longitudinal study with this or another similar group, would offer insight into whether the beginnings of self-awareness progress to critical self reflection, and whether interreligious dialogue undermines or strengthens religious identity. Likewise, the data provided by this study also needs further plumbing to see what other insights it offers. Further study should also be done with people participating in intermediate or advanced interreligious dialogue, both professionals/academics and lay people.

The growing reality of religious plurality in North American society demands a response from religious communities in their educational efforts. In my estimation, neither separatism nor denial of difference have proven to be effective approaches for congregation members. Instead, I believe intelligent engagement across boundaries offers the greatest hope for both greater respect and understanding of oneself and the other. Such engagement does not just happen, especially in a society where there are few models for productive conversation. Therefore, religious communities have to better understand the dynamics, costs and benefits of interreligious dialogue in order for it to be used effectively both in formal educational settings, like the one studied here, and in the day to day encounters of diverse religious practitioners.

Appendix – Codes

1. Alignment with tradition or group: articulating or teaching the tradition
2. Articulating self understanding: reflections on the effort to articulate what one is thinking or believing, one's own or one's tradition
3. Catholic: the tradition to which the participant belongs.
4. Changed impression of the other
5. Conversation: their thoughts on conversation and how it's working.
6. Defense mechanism: an effort to change or frustrate the course of conversation from current direction through verbal or physical tactics
7. Differentiation of self from group: effort to distinguish oneself from the larger tradition, even from the group of 'same' currently present.
8. Expectations for course: those expectations stated early on as to what the course will do for them, particularly relative to the presence of the other.
9. Expressing comfort
10. Expressing discomfort: instances of participants naming their own discomfort.
11. Finding agreement: instances of participants from two traditions finding agreement in discussion.
12. Formal education: participant's highest level of formal education
13. Identifying challenge to tradition: when the speaker picks up something that seems to challenge what they understand about their own tradition.
14. Increased intimacy physical
15. Increased intimacy verbal: instances of increased self-disclosure or personal inquiry of the other
16. Jewish: the tradition to which the participant belongs
17. Jewish difference in re-crafting identity: indicators of difference in how/what Jews process religious identity.
18. Language difference, mine: instances that I notice a discrepancy between how one group uses language from the other. They seem to be misunderstanding one another
19. Language difference, them: instances where they notice a discrepancy between what one group means in language usage and what the other group is understanding.
20. Learning about ones own tradition
21. Learning about the other tradition
22. Physical cues: all indications of meaningful if unconscious physical contact. That includes notations in seating arrangements, spoken desires for closeness, changes in physical relationships.
23. Prior relationship – none: they have had little or no real connection with a person of the other tradition
24. Prior relationship with other: they have had some significant interaction with someone of the other tradition.
25. Prior understanding of the other: indications of what participants believe about the other prior to the learnings in this course.
26. Public voice: indications of using a voice outside of this experience about the experience, learned from it, or inspired by it.
27. QQ: quotable quotes

28. Raising a question: instances of a question being raised in group discussion/pairing.
29. Reason for enrolling: their own stated reasons for enrolling in course.
30. Relationship between Judaism and Christianity: examples of participant describing the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.
31. Relationship development: instances of relationships developing.
32. Relationship difficulty: indicators of difficulty in established (if only slightly) relationship
33. Self definition-early: how they name themselves in relation to their tradition, including their religious practices.
34. Self definition-later: instances of/differences from above named later in the course
35. Self disclosure: instances of self-disclosure
36. Self-awareness: moment of becoming aware of positions held - that they are held or that they are being challenged/ articulated
37. Stereotypes: instances of discussion about stereotypes held, or of situations exhibiting stereotypes
38. Thinking aloud in group
39. Tradition critical with other
40. Tradition critical with same: willingness to be critical of one's own tradition with those of the same tradition
41. Using historical perspective
42. Willingness to be self critical: willingness to openly critic one's own position.
43. Willingness to restate previous position: makes effort to re-consider one's previously held belief or opinion.