

Touching the You
A Transformative Approach to Christians and Jews in Dialogue
Learning in the Presence of the Other

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Introduction

The invitation to dialogue between Christians and Jews formally began with the Second Vatican Council document, *Nostra Aetate (Declaration On The Relation Of The Church To Non-Christian Religions, 1965)*. The briefest of the sixteen Council documents (just four pages in length), *Nostra Aetate* was also among the most controversial for its overturning the centuries-old “teaching of contempt” for Jews and Judaism. The principles outlined in the 1965 Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, are excerpted here:

In our age, when people are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened, the Church examines with greater care the relations which she has to non-Christian religions. Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations, she reflects at the outset on what people have in common and what tends to promote unity among them...Indeed, the Church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed. Remembering, then, her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by an political consideration, but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deplors all hatreds, persecutions and displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time from any source against the Jews.

--Vatican II. *Nostra Aetate* (28 October, 1965)

Nostra Aetate was followed by two other Vatican documents, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (1974) and *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*

(1985). As follow-up documents, *Guidelines* and *Notes* helped to advance the philosophical and theological principles of *Nostra Aetate* by addressing its implementation in biblical study, catechesis, preaching and the formative dimensions of the liturgy.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the third and emergent stage in the Christian-Jewish encounter: *adult education for interreligious learning*. “Interreligious learning is a form of dialogue that emphasizes study in the presence of the other and an encounter with the tradition that the other embodies” (Boys and Lee, 2006, 94). The transformative character of interreligious learning takes place in the encounter with the other’s tradition where the exploration of difference becomes “part of the process of defining and being defined” (English and Gillen, 2000, 532). Engagement with the religious other is rooted in self-identity, including the historical, theological and visceral dimensions of one’s tradition.

When we speak of the “embodied tradition” of the other, we refer to an encounter with Judaism or Christianity as lived by committed Jews or Christians (Boys and Lee, 2006). It includes the full complement of beliefs, practices and “affective attachments” that root one to a particular tradition. In this way, the transforming power of educating for interreligious learning is not limited to the abstract knowledge of the other or a cognitive-rational or linear approach (Mezirow, 2000). Rather, it is a sustained and complex process of learning that involves thoughts and feelings, relationships of trust, safe environments for dialogue, and a readiness for change (Taylor, 2000). In the complicated history of Christians and Jews, this process often involves both reconciliation and healing alongside of a critically reflective understanding of the other and oneself. As a form of dialogue that emphasizes study in the presence of the other and encounter with the embodied tradition of the other, interreligious learning “is not an independent act but an interdependent relationship built on trust” (Merriam, 2001, 19).

The transforming value of educating for interreligious learning is the new relationship which such dialogue empowers. The four salient phases of transformative learning in the Christian-Jewish encounter will be discussed as critical reflection, social interaction, reflection-in-action, and new meaning-making in the new understanding of self and other. As we consider this theory of learning, it is worth recalling the words of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber in his famous work, *I and Thou*, “The purpose of relation is relation itself – touching the You. For as soon as we touch a You, we are touched by a breath of eternal life” (Buber, 1990, 237).

Transformation as Critical Reflection

In the early years of the new relationship between Christians and Jews, education focused on the breaking down of stereotypes and prejudices based on a more correct knowledge, both historical and theological, of the distinctive relationship between the two traditions. Forty-two years later, the educational task also involves a focus on new understandings, “Jews need to address their self-understanding based on history, and Christians need to reconstitute their theology because so much of it has been grounded in an inadequate understanding of Judaism” (Boys and Lee, 2006, 5). The emerging theory of interreligious learning moves beyond a more discriminating and abstract knowledge of the other through principles and practices that attempt to unleash the power of education to transform. It is a transformation that is not solely rational. Learning that intentionally builds upon the interaction of participants and involves more than ideas and concepts can have a transforming effect. In the process of critically reflecting on the beliefs and attitudes of the other, we can effect more than a correction of misinformed interpretation. “In the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world,” changing these structures of expectation, “make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative

perspective” (Mezirow, 1991, 187). The role of critical reflection in interreligious learning is the process of helping participants to become more critically aware of their assumptions about the other and how these assumptions have constrained their understanding. By questioning these “habits of expectation”, Christians and Jews can begin to move past distorted premises to a more informed and integrative perspective on the tradition (sacred texts, beliefs and practices) of the other.

Transformation as Social Interaction

Interreligious learning between Christians and Jews recognizes that education with the power to transform is a social process. In the effort to transcend learning about the other in purely rational terms, “significant others” become central to the learning experience. The principle of learning in the presence of the other in order to encounter the lived tradition of the other is fundamental to interreligious learning and its transformative goal. “The participants in interreligious dialogue agree to trust and respect each other enough to entrust each other with their sacred stories, experiences, historical events, interpretations, beliefs, mysteries, questions and uncertainties” (Coppola, 2006, xv). The social dimension of this learning also points to the major impediments in group discourse and the skills of the educator in negotiating emotionally charged “trigger events” that can emerge in the early stages of dialogue. Religious educators must provide a “safe educational environment for learning” based on participant trust in the competency of the educational design, the competency of the educational leader and the feasibility of the educational objectives (Vella, 1994). If participant trust in the learning experience is a priority for dialogue, says Vella, they must feel free to express their expectations, fears and hopes, and be able to find their voice in the group. The kinds of social environment that must be created by educational leaders are safe, non-judgmental learning spaces where

participants experience both the affirmation and encouragement to risk crossing religious borders.

Transformation as Reflection-in-Action

Boys and Lee employ a model of pedagogical reasoning developed by educational theorist, Lee Shulman. In this context, teaching is “praxis”, a reflection-in-action that occurs over four movements; preparation or connecting the materials/content with the main insights or ideas; representation or how to make the material vividly accessible; selection or the repertoire of most appropriate teaching strategies; and adaptation or the weighing of subject matter for the cultural backgrounds or special needs of participants (Shulman, 1987)

The model is linear but its application in teaching is not. Reflecting on what is occurring during the teaching experience means continually evaluating the four movements based on the actual teaching and learning that is occurring. For interreligious learning to be potentially transforming, the emphasis is placed on the process of learning since “to be knowledgeable requires more than grasping a great deal of information: it requires being “caught-up” in the transforming possibilities of this knowledge” (Boys and Lee, 2006, 99). Mindful of the adaptations that must be made within these four pedagogical movements, discussion and problem-posing are key strategies for the educator. The emphasis in interreligious learning that is placed on conversation also requires that participants are functioning from a level playing field. This underscores the importance of making quality resources available to participants in advance of the session. It is not only the instructor but the participants who must be well prepared in order to fully engage the learning experience. Preparation helps participants feel confident enough to enter the conversation and secure enough to “jump into the deep water” which is pivotal to the quality of the learning experience.

Transformation as New Perspective on Self and Other

If educating for Christian-Jewish dialogue is meant to be a process of transformative learning that occurs in the presence of the religious other and the encounter with the other's tradition, it follows that participants in this kind of engagement must possess a knowledgeable and strong commitment to their respective traditions. Religious education within one's faith tradition is a necessary prerequisite to interreligious learning. A strong sense of religious identity is needed in order for participants to encounter the vitality of the other's tradition both as it is understood and lived. From a learning theory perspective, this implies that the meaning of one's religious identity must be in place before the process of transformation (i.e. any major challenge to an established perspective) can occur. Simply said, if I am not already a committed Christian or Jew and grounded in my religious particularity, then my learning about the other will only produce confusion, syncretism or indifference. The educational aim of interreligious learning is a deepened sense of religious identity that results from my willingness to allow the other to "get inside" my tradition. This includes examining my beliefs and values and ultimately risking what Mezirow describes as "disorientation" in the process of new meaning making or going deeper into one's religious self-understanding. In transformative learning, the disequilibrium that may occur in the process of dialogue, and the reflection and feedback that can lead to ambivalence and ambiguity is not essential to transformative learning. However, such experiences as cognitive confusion are found "to foster movement toward a stronger, more compassionate, more complex, and better integrated self" (Mezirow, 1991, 168).

In the context of Christians and Jews in dialogue, where the tragic history of their relationship has been painful and long, this disorientation can be gradual or immediate; it can

appear as emotional unease or cognitive confusion. The transformative learning model offered by theorist Jane Taylor (Mezirow, 1991, 172) describes this phase as the “generation of consciousness” where trigger events (new knowledge that contradicts strongly held assumptions) force the confrontation with a new reality or understanding. Taylor locates the transformation to a new understanding of reality in “a shift or leap of transcendence” when a new perspective transcends an old one. The reconstruction or reframing of one’s perspective at this stage requires the capacity for commitment to a new perspective which is grounded once the new perspective is applied to new understanding and behavior. When educational experiences create the opportunity for a transformed understanding of self and other, the challenging work of applying the new perspective often begins after the formal educational program has ended. Some form of continuity in educating for interreligious dialogue is necessary (either formal or informal) so that participants can receive ongoing support, affirmation and encouragement as they integrate and extend the new perspective to new understandings and behaviors.

Conclusion

A central paradox of educating for interreligious dialogue and understanding is that such learning aims neither for syncretism nor mere tolerance. The transformative value of interreligious learning is the capacity to strengthen self-identity through a deeper understanding of the religious other. Interreligious learning is “built upon an encounter of commitments and a respect for difference that flows from knowledge of one’s tradition” (Boys and Lee, 2006, 8). In the work to encourage dialogue between Christians and Jews over the past forty years, interreligious learning represents a new and promising stage in educating adults for the transforming potential of dialogue. The emerging theory of interreligious learning provides a template for religious educators in the academy and in local congregations that can facilitate a

relationship between Christians and Jews that is capable of moving beyond abstract knowledge of the other to a relationship of mutual respect and fraternal dialogue. Interreligious learning that provides the opportunity to be transformed in the presence of the other can inspire Jews to be better Jews and Christians to be better Christians. Such dialogue is truly a sacred space that opens “the pathways to new understandings of how God and human beings are in relationship” (Huebner, 1996, 584).

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