

Interfaith Encounters in America
A Faculty Development Proposal

4. NARRATIVE

I. Significance

Survey research consistently identifies Americans as persistently religious people, in contrast with our more secularized counterparts across the developed world. At the same time, U.S. public policy and majority sentiment embrace diversity and freedom of religion as major national assets. How do deeply held religious beliefs intersect with affirmations of pluralism? How do religious Americans understand the religious others with whom they share national identity and, increasingly, neighborhoods and workplaces? This proposal seeks .2 release time for Fall 2003 to advance my research on interfaith encounters in America. After presenting a paper at the American Academy of Religion in November 2002 on the topic of online interfaith dialogue, I received invitations from several publishers to submit book proposals on this subject (see Attachments 1-4). This assigned time would allow me to (1) revise and expand the conference paper into a full length sample chapter and (2) develop a prospectus for publishers' consideration. I will be undergoing review for promotion to Full Professor in 2004-05. As I indicate below, release now is critical to bringing this book to fruition by that time.

Especially since September 11, 2001, great attention has been given in both scholarly and popular media to the problems of religious conflict in the United States. While important, this work masks the long history and ongoing vitality of interfaith dialogue, encounters in which people of different religious affiliations come together voluntarily with the goals of mutual understanding and cooperation. The interfaith movement in the United States goes back at least as far as the first World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, and academic analyses of interreligious relations is an important and well established branch of academic religious studies, with its roots in 19th century efforts at the "science" of comparative religion. To date, however, this field has been largely theoretical, the work of philosophers and theologians

articulating models for conceptualizing religious difference. The “data” on which these theories are built are typically textual (scripture, theological works, official statements of religious organizations, etc.) and institutional, that is the view of religious “others” held by particular denominations and their official representatives.

Studies of American religion, though, suggest that religious ideas and practices are no longer fastened to specific texts and institutions; increasingly Americans espouse religious identities that are individual, eclectic, and dynamic (Bellah 1986, Wuthnow 1988, Hammond 1992). The spiritual freedoms made possible by the loss of Protestant hegemony have brought the model of the religious marketplace to the fore. Those of the Baby Boom, “X”, and “Y” generations increasingly live their religious lives in what Wade Clark Roof has called a “quest culture;” whether one is an eclectic seeker or a born-again dogmatist, there is emerging a common pattern of American religion as a conscious process of creative personal choice (Roof 1999). Interfaith encounters occur within and are an increasingly important element of this new American religious context.

Accurate understanding of what actually occurs when Americans of one religious identity engage those of another, therefore, demands both real data and new theoretical categories. It is here that I see the unique contribution of my work. It is not a study of abstract theological positions regarding religious difference, but an analysis of what actually goes on in interfaith encounters—between individuals on the Internet seeking spiritual enrichment, in local interfaith councils dealing with problems of community violence, in national interreligious coalitions strategically formed to oppose abortion, in the interfaith peace movement that has coalesced following September 11, 2001, and countless other contexts. Critical questions addressed by my research include: (1) Who participates in interfaith dialogue? Does their involvement in and understanding of this dialogue square with the positions of their religious institutions? What is the significance of other factors like class, race, and education in determining who participates, and how? (2) How does the context of the encounter (educational or political; local or national; virtual or face-

to-face; ecclesial or commercial) shape what goes on in interfaith dialogue? (3) How do American interfaith activities reflect or challenge emerging patterns in American religion (individualism, syncretism, etc.)? This project thus stands to advance understanding of the dynamics of interfaith dialogue as it occurs in actual American contexts. I anticipate the results will challenge traditional models of interreligious understanding as well as popular perceptions of the conflictual nature of interreligious relations, and at the same time bring into focus an important new development in American religious experience.

II. Proposed Activities and Timeline

Sample Chapter: Interfaith Dialogue on the Internet

I have completed a 15-page study of online interfaith dialogue, "Meeting the Other in Cyberspace: Interfaith Dialogue in the Internet," which focuses as a case study on Beliefnet.com, the largest for-profit multifaith site on the web (receiving over one million unique visitors every month), where interfaith dialogue occurs in multiple settings. Academic analysis of religion on the Internet is a growing field, but as of yet there are no significant studies of the scope or character of online interreligious encounter. This paper, presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Toronto, critically examines (1) who participates in this virtual dialogue; (2) how online dialogue differs from traditional interreligious encounters and whether or not it seems to be delivering on its promise of greater religious convergence and cooperation; (3) how this mode of interfaith dialogue might challenge established scholarly models of understanding religious diversity; and finally (4) how the overt commercialism of the Internet generally and this site specifically might be shaping the development of American understandings of religious difference.

This paper was very well received, generating inquiries from four publishers, as noted above, and will serve as the basis of an important chapter in my book-length study. To complete that chapter for submission with the book prospectus, I will need to expand it in two ways. First, the research on Beliefnet will need to be updated. I studied hundreds of posts in dialogue groups, and compiled a profile over 100

dialogue participants. I will need to do a smaller sample analysis in order to verify the patterns that emerged from my study and to incorporate more recent illustrative quotes. Second, I want to include a profile of several other interfaith websites as counter-examples to the kind of dialogue that occurs on Beliefnet. As the respondent to my paper at the conference noted, there are other online dialogue sites that are much more polemical and more reflective of the religious exclusivist position, which is only minimally represented on Beliefnet. While these sites are much smaller, they are a significant expression of another kind of online interfaith encounter. Specifically, I will examine Answering-Islam.com and Answering-Christians.com, Christian and Muslim sites that, while apologetic, viewed together constitute a real dialogical encounter, with interesting parallels to Medieval Christian-Muslim disputations. I plan to do this expanding and revising work first, and expect it to be completed by the half-way point of the semester.

Book Prospectus

During the second half of the semester I will assemble the actual prospectus for publishers. In order to for this to be a compelling proposal, I need to (1) review recent literature on the interfaith movement to situate my project, and (2) develop a detailed chapter outline that identifies the groups to be studied and the orienting questions for each analysis. (See Attachment 5 for a tentative list of chapter topics.) With that work in place, I should be able to prepare the prospectus very quickly, submitting it by the end of 2003.

III. Additional Benefits

I have established a solid research trajectory since my arrival at Chico State in 1994; publication of four major articles and one edited collection were important factors in my earning tenure in 2000. It will be important for me to maintain this successful record in order to secure promotion to the rank of full professor, for which I will be under review in AY 2004-05. The Department of Religious Studies RTP Criteria emphasize the importance of maintaining and demonstrating scholarly currency, and list "book publication by a quality press" as the primary means of demonstrating this currency. It is therefore my goal to have the

book on American interfaith encounters under contract and in draft form and by this time. Assigned time of .2 in Fall 2003 will allow me to prepare for publishers a quality prospectus and sample chapter. With a contract in hand, I hope to secure sabbatical and/or Summer Scholars awards to complete a draft of the book by the end of 2004.

It is also important to note the time-sensitive nature of this topic. Its “on the ground” approach to interfaith relations places it in the context of growing interest in religion and American popular culture. The material on online dialogue, in particular will be important to publish quickly. While there is increasing academic interest in the nature and significance of religion on the Internet, to date, this research has tended to focus on the nature of online religious experience (e.g. Zalesky 1997, Cobb 1998, Brasher 2001), the virtual transformation of traditional religion (e.g. O’Leary 1996), and cataloging online religious resources (e.g. Durusau 1998). As of yet, there is no systematic study of online interfaith encounters, though the potential for these is one of the most widely celebrated aspects of cyber-religion among its proponents (Brasher 2001, 6-7, 93). Similarly, general studies of interfaith relations in the U.S. generally Establishing expertise with a major publication on this subject will enhance my reputation (and therefore that of the Department, College and University) as a scholar of American popular religion.

This research also stands to contribute directly to my work with students on the Chico State Campus. In the survey of Christianity that I teach regularly, this material will serve as a valuable component of the unit I teach on Christian approaches to non-Christian religions. I have also been involved in extracurricular interfaith work through such events as the Wellness Center’s “Religious Diversity Panel” that I facilitated in Fall 2002. Following that event, several students approached me about the possibility of forming an interfaith student organization, which I would very much enjoy organizing and advising, and which would be directly informed by this research project. Finally, I foresee sharing the results of my research with colleagues through such venues as the Humanities Center Colloquia and the Conversations on Diversity sponsored by the Center for Multicultural and Gender Studies.

5. QUALIFICATIONS

I hold the PhD in Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion from the Graduate Theological Union. My 1994 dissertation, "Liberation and Pluralism: A Critical-Constructive Conversation for Postmodern Christian Theology," laid the theoretical foundation for this project by presenting a critical analysis of models for understanding philosophical and theological approaches to religious difference in Christian theology. My 1998 article, "Reckoning with Religious Difference: Models of Interreligious Moral Dialogue" updated and expanded that work into a multifaith analysis of approaches to religious diversity.

This current project draws upon that analysis and applies it to the particular context of American interreligious dialogue as it occurs through Internet exchanges, local interfaith councils, national interfaith activist coalitions, interreligious educational forums, and the like. For this more sociological task, I developed expertise in the course of my work on *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (Routledge 2001), a collection I co-edited, and for which I wrote one chapter and several section introductions, and co-wrote the Introduction. In the course of this project I became current in recent scholarship on American religion and popular culture, and developed skills in using online discussion groups as ethnographic data. Together, these experiences equip me (uniquely, I believe) both theoretically and practically for the study of American interreligious dialogue.

Relevant Publications and Presentations

"Meeting the Other in Cyberspace: Interfaith Dialogue on the Internet," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November 2002, Toronto, Ontario.

God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture, co-edited with Eric Mazur. Routledge, 2001.

"Reckoning with Religious Difference: Models of Interreligious Moral Dialogue," in *Comparative Religious Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Bruce Grelle and Sumner B. Twiss, Westview Press, 1998.

"Women's Experience as a Hermeneutical Key to a Christian Theology of Religions," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*. 6/2, 1996, 163-173.

"Liberation in a Religiously Plural World: The Problem of Normative Claims in Latin American Liberation Theology," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 10/2, 1994, 197-213.

6. RESULTS OF PREVIOUS SUPPORT

Fall 2002: CELT Small Grant for Instruction: \$300 for travel to the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Toronto, Ontario, November 23-26, 2002 (presented paper).

Fall 2002: CSU Research Grant: Assigned time of .2 to support preparation of conference paper "meeting the Other in Cyberspace: Interfaith Dialogue on the Internet." Paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Toronto, Ontario, November 2002, and at CSU, Chico Humanities Center Symposium, November 2002.

Fall 2001: CELT Small Grant for Instruction: \$300 for travel to the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Denver, CO, November 9-12, 2001.

Fall 1999: CELT Small Grant for Instruction: \$300 for travel to the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Boston, MA, November 18-22, 1999 (presented paper).

Spring 1999: CELT Small Grant for Instruction: \$300 for travel to present paper at American Culture Association/Popular Culture Association Conference, New Orleans, LA, April 6-8, 2000 (presented paper).

Spring 1999: CELT Small Grant for Instruction: \$300 for travel to present paper at American Culture Association/Popular Culture Association Conference, San Diego, CA, March 31- April 3, 1999 (presented paper)

Spring 1999: CSUC Professional Development Grant: Assigned time of .2 to support the editing of *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. (Published by Routledge, 2001.)

Spring 1998: CELT Small Grant for Instruction: \$200 for travel to attend California State University Women's Studies Conference, Long Beach, CA, February 28, 1998.

Fall 1997- Spring 1998: CSUC Professional Development Grant: Assigned time of .2 for academic year 1997-98, to support the writing of chapter and introduction to *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*.

7. Current and Pending Support

I am currently receiving no support for this project, nor do I have any other applications pending at this time.