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# The Interfaith Movement in a Liminal Age: The Institutionalization of a Movement

Nathan R. Kollar

## P R E C I S

*This essay confronts current questions within the interfaith movement: What is it? Does it have a clear purpose? What is its role within our current liminal culture? How do we articulate the answers to these questions in order to gain a place in the academy, establish an interfaith atmosphere in the classroom, and gain funds to achieve its mission? The questions, in turn, are answered by providing descriptions of the diverse ways “interfaith” is used in public discourse in an age of continual uncertainty and fracturing. These descriptions are then placed within the practical multireligious world of teaching, fundraising, and professionalization of an academic discipline.*



## Introduction

When you are part of a movement, you are alive with the sense of knowing what is wrong with the world and knowing how to correct that wrong. Your easily recognized comrades share the same intuitive sense of right and wrong and labor earnestly to bring the movement’s ideas, rituals, and skills to the general public as a significant contribution to the common good. Those in the contemporary interfaith movement<sup>1</sup> sense that

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<sup>1</sup>Some would place the beginning of the interfaith movement in 1893 at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago (<http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/>), while others claim it began within the courts of the Abbasid Empire between 750 and 1258 C.E. (see Romana G. Manzoor, “The Past and Present Interplay among People of Abrahamic Faiths in the Development of Theological Language and Academic Faculties,” in Nathan R. Kollar and Muhammad Shafiq, eds., *Sacred Texts and Human Contexts: A North American Response to “A Common Word between Us and You”* [North Charleston, SC: Cre-

religions should have no part in war, violence, and divisiveness among peoples and should always be a source of empathy for others—expressed in a willingness to learn about the other, feel along with the other, and live in peace with the other—while working toward the common good. “Interfaith dialogue” is a common descriptor of the movement.

It takes place in at least three ways: informally, institutionally, and intellectually. Dialogue occurs informally when people of diverse religions gather together to discuss a matter of common concern, such as each member’s views of marriage or what they should do about a religious slur by a local politician. Institutional gatherings are held with much more preparation, such as the selection of delegates and prepared agendas, for example, the meetings at the King Abdullah International Centre for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna or the meetings of the Interreligious Council of Russia. Intellectual interfaith dialogue occurs when one uses the research skills and information provided by diverse disciplines to analyze and bring to fruition the goals of the interfaith movement.

Today, when institutionalization begins to occur in a movement, it immediately begins to use the tools of managerial theory and public relations. To use these tools, a mission statement, goals, and objectives must be agreed upon. The processes as well as the actual formulation of a mission statement, goals, and objectives are important to the movement as it begins its process of institutionalization.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I will describe how our current liminal culture shapes the interfaith movement in such a way that it is a marker of future interaction among religions. I will then use the entry of the interfaith movement into academia as an example of an institutionalization process that is also occurring within the movement as it seeks grants and other funds and develops necessary evaluation instruments for its diverse activities.

First, however, I would like to point to the historical context of this discussion. We are in a time of intense change that is challenging the very identity of those communities we term “religious.” This change is unique not

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atespace, 2014], pp. 135–146). Here, we mean the movement as it began among diverse religions toward the latter part of the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup>The search and refinement of mission statements are common to contemporary professional living. What is not common are the terms used for this process. A helpful source for understanding these differences is Thomas J. Sergiovanni and Reginald Leon Green, *The Principalship: A Reflective Practice Perspective*, 7th ed., rev. (New York: Pearson, 2014).

only to religions but also to the cultures within which they are embedded. This is especially important in order to understand what is happening in today's interfaith movement, because "interfaith" itself demands a significant change in one's way of looking at religions within one's culture. In other words, the change demanded by interfaith activity is a deep change within a deeper cultural change. The context of the interfaith movement in the second decade of the twenty-first century challenges the modern world itself without necessarily offering a clear future for those living in this passing modern world. Because of the type of change that is occurring in interfaith dialogue, as well as the religious communities that constitute it, it is not at all the way it was in the past.

## I. Liminality

Our understanding of something never ends. Time and place form contexts that stimulate new experiences, insights, and understandings of everything we encounter, including religions.<sup>3</sup> The stability of a religion's printed text and/or ritual provides a sense of eternity and certitude among believers. The change of interpretations allows those texts and rituals, in their seeming eternity and certitude, to enliven the present enough to forge a healthy future for the religious community. A quick glance at the history of any religion shows such an evolution.<sup>4</sup> This ebb and flow of stability and change has enabled Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for example, to provide meaningful lives to individuals and communities over the centuries. The "text" is always the text interpreted, and the interpretation is always within the times, places, and languages in which the texts are read. The meaning of the religious texts and religious life today is dependent upon the ever-changing contexts of everyday life.

Change is occurring in every aspect of contemporary life: technology, economics, environment, population, ideologies, and gender relations, to

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<sup>3</sup>For an excellent review of interpretative theory, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987). This is updated in his *The Character of Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>For Christianity, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971–91), 5 vols. For the development of modes of interpretation for the Abrahamic religions, see Kollar and Shafiq, *Sacred Texts and Human Contexts*, chaps. 1–3.

name a few. Asymmetric warfare enables anyone with a cause to bring terror and destruction to any society anywhere at any time, so walls are built around countries and homes to defend against such terror. People return to their economic, educational, ethnic, or religious tribe within those walls to find the trust, truth, and history that provide their individual and social identity amidst the chaos of contemporary change. This sense of deep and total change is not new, for it has been with us during the advance of the modern world and now in postmodern times. The diverse fundamentalisms and liberalisms are evidence of responses to change during the “modern” era, but the modern era is dying, and a new one is advancing. While some label the new era “postmodern,” I would call it “liminal.”

## II. Here and Now: Postmodern? Liminal!

Many commentators describe today’s place and time as “postmodern,” but are we really postmodern? Geography and family usually trump historical commentators, especially when dealing with religion. Where a person is born and with whom one lives one’s life—parents, peers, work, and family—greatly affect what one wishes to change and what one desires for a future for self, friends, and enemies. A great many people still view the world as modern, while many more are pre-modern.<sup>5</sup> Many commentators describe our Western world as living in a postmodern epoch because, from their professional perspective, the modern world has disintegrated.

One reason they see the modern world as breaking apart is that what is essential to contemporary ways of thinking and acting is no longer as absolute as it used to be. Modern reductionist analysis, dominance of objective reason, and norms needed for and resultant from such analysis began to fall apart in the face of intense historical and archeological research, globalization, and the consumer society, with its associated niche marketing. Postmodernism now offers, in place of modernism’s scientific certitudes, a way of life more like a raft than a home with a solid foundation. We live on a raft of data evidenced and held together by structures of power possessed by charismatic and/or dictatorial leaders. The raft floats on a sea of uncertainty, paddled in many ways by a type of Cartesian doubt (hermeneutic of suspi-

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<sup>5</sup>See Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel’s *Cultural Map of the World* at [http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs/articles/folder\\_published/article\\_base\\_54](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs/articles/folder_published/article_base_54).

cion) that provides little direction. Conversations and stories are seen as giving us a purpose and direction that somehow hold us in existence and provide us with identity. As with the medieval and the modern perspectives, this postmodern view of power and truth has become part of political, educational, and many religious ways of life.<sup>6</sup>

Another reason that the modern world is seen as disintegrating is that it has not provided the benefits it promised of peace, health, and economic security. World War I showed us how we could use reason to kill soldiers more efficiently. Adolf Hitler showed us how to kill our fellow citizens in a rational, efficient, and scientific way. The atomic bomb held out the promise of destroying the earth. In one century we have caused as much death and suffering as in the previous four.<sup>7</sup> When and how will it end? The beginning of the twenty-first century promises no less death and suffering as economic and environmental degradation increases, along with nuclear proliferation. The modern habits we have established as individuals and cultures obviously threaten to destroy our bodies and the earth itself. Deep within each of us is the need to change the world in which we live, yet the habits of life that we, as a culture, have formed in the modern world prevent us from making these changes individually or culturally. The postmodern world offers no clear measure of the religious goals involved in seeking the new patterns of life and habits. No wonder so many wish it was all over and we could start again. Starting over, however, can never be done as if our past never existed. The term “postmodern” suggests we know exactly what is past—the modern—and are ignorant of where we are: “post,” and nothing else. But, we know a great deal about where we are: We are at an in-between moment,<sup>8</sup> a time of liminality.

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<sup>6</sup>For a good example of how the “modern” shaped the mainline churches, see Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

<sup>7</sup>See Joan Ringelheim, “The Strange and the Familiar,” in Michael A. Signer, ed., *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 37.

<sup>8</sup>This in-between time is well described in Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

### III. The Liminality of the Present

Victor Turner used the term “liminality” to describe the inbetweenness of the puberty rites leading to adulthood for aboriginal peoples.<sup>9</sup> The children in a tribe live with the expectations associated with their role in society. They are comfortable with the mode of speaking, acting, and relating to those around them that are appropriate to the role of being a child. At a certain time, the pubescent children are suddenly taken from the larger group of children and, through ritual, are transformed into adults. This “in-between time” of the puberty rite is the time of “liminality,” of disorientation. All the former signposts of a child’s way of life are gone, so that the child often has a sense of having died.<sup>10</sup> The rites themselves often include a portrayal of dying to one’s old self and coming alive to one’s new self. Once the children become aware, through ritual, of this new self, they return to the society with a new role and the corresponding language, actions, and relationships that are part of that new role.

This concept of liminality has been used by many scholars to describe struggles that individuals have when facing difficult transition moments in their life cycle or movements within one’s social hierarchy. This concept can also be used to describe what happens in a culture. A culture, of course, is people. People responding to postmodern change will experience individual liminality with a corresponding transition of identity and self. When they look back, they will be able to see deep cultural changes that affect the way they believe, how they conceive of right and wrong, and what they want to achieve in life.

These deep changes are found in pivotal marking events in politics, ideas, technology, and religion. Such a change, in politics, for example, is first seen in a culture’s inability to find common ground in the face of a common enemy—or even to agree on who or what the enemy is. A revolution or

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<sup>9</sup> See Victor W. Turner, “Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Comunitas,” in his *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 231–271.

<sup>10</sup> Many mystics also have this time of inbetweenness when it seems that the past has been for nothing, and the future holds no promise. The God they have been so close to is no more. In the cry of Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” rumble through every moment of their existence. It is called *Noche obscura del alma*, “the dark night of the soul.” See St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, tr. and ed. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1990).

an election marks the change, but the change is liminal because the revolution or election serves as only a brief interim before another revolution or election occurs that is as radical as the previous one. The same kind of deep change may be seen within religious institutions as people begin to find deep disagreements with the central elements of the religion, such as attending to the leaders' commands, the interpretation of foundational writings, or the inability to sense the fulfillment of the religion's promises in this life or the next. During these times, new religions begin to emerge.

These marking events form a dialectical pattern in which the "new" breaks through at a certain moment in time, seemingly to dominate the culture, only to find within a short time that it was an illusion. The "old" returns with a vengeance. Now, conscious of what is happening, the old begins to exercise its power to destroy the new. This dialectic sometimes occurs quickly, sometimes over centuries. By way of illustration, consider the following as a pictured timeline of change from OLD/OLD to NEW/NEW:

OLD/OLD...NEW/old.....new/OLD.....New/OLd.....NEw/Old.....  
NEW/old....NEW/NEW

The numerator indicates the culture of less influence, the denominator the culture of more influence, as visualized within the culture. The dialectic is such that there is a continual contest over the language spoken by the culture, the normative ethical and ritual actions of the culture, and the proper empowering modes of decision-making in the culture. Slowly, what is new becomes part of the way people speak, act, and gather. Slowly, these ways of speaking, acting, and gathering provide a sense of meaning, belonging, rightness, and well-being to the change agents of the culture. Slowly, through trial and error, the new way sustains peoples' lives. Slowly, a new culture becomes *the* way of life. Of course, we see this dialectic only from the rearview mirror of the now-dominant culture (NEW/NEW).

A great deal of activity is going on among the various subcultures<sup>11</sup> as people cross over from one way of living to another. The subcultures are composed of varying generations. As each new generation enters into the

<sup>11</sup>For a description of what happens within each of these dialectical events, see Nathan R. Kollar, "The Death of National Symbols: Roman Catholicism in Quebec," in Peter C. Phan, ed., *Ethnicity, Nationality, and Religious Experience*, Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, 1991, vol. 37 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), pp. 289–309.



culture, the culture as a whole finds many of its members shifting from one way of thinking and acting to another. The generation that reacts to the younger generation by fighting, fleeing, adapting, or boredom quickly finds, as it attempts to socialize its children into their way of life, that the children do not feel or react to what the parents thought was new. This is to be expected, for the world has changed since the initial reaction of the parenting generation. The younger generation is reacting to this changed world with any of the four options mentioned above. A quick look at an example of generational difference in the United States as provided by R. Zemke, C. Raines, and B. Filipczak demonstrates what I mean.<sup>12</sup> Take leadership as an example. Throughout the twentieth century, it flows in this sequence from generation to generation: Leadership is by the “boss” who tells us what to do; leadership is by all of us as we agree what to do; leadership is by those who know what to do; leadership is a team working together to accomplish a goal, part of which is our mutual appreciation of each other.

What we see here is an important part of any cultural life: its view of leaders. The same can be said of gender relationships, technological usage, economic expectations, and many other aspects of daily life. Movement among these expectations of leadership, gender, technology, and economics within a culture exemplifies what is happening within the subgroups, because people are being socialized into various patterns of leadership and ways to react to larger shifts of words, actions, and social relations. This movement of subcultures and generations within them is the expression of the larger culture’s liminality, of its attempt to stabilize itself in the face of “the new” of pivotal change.<sup>13</sup>

When we are talking about one dominant culture with many subcultures, there must be something that brings the various cultures together to form one culture. Within each culture there are transitional subcultures that act as agents of transition and translation of what is new and what is old—change agents that act as interlocutors between the old and new in a culture. Much like immigrant children who translate the language and ac-

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<sup>12</sup>See Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace* (New York: AMACOM [American Management Association], 2000).

<sup>13</sup>An example of other subcultures that may be indicators of change may be found in Alissa Quart, *Republic of Outsiders: The Power of Amateurs, Dreamers, and Rebels* (New York: New Press, 2014).

tions of the new land to their parents from the old country, these transitory subcultures translate the old and new to each other. Many experience this every day as they ask a younger person to help with a new form of technology. The “older” one may be eighteen, and the “younger” may be six!<sup>14</sup>

Among the many subcultures energized by our liminal situation is a subculture of religious belief that is growing within religions—for example, a religious belief that is open to new interpretations of older readings of its sacred texts, that is willing to embrace those who believe differently, that is open to learning from other religions, that can mature only in a pluralistic society that encourages a deeper understanding of religious belief and the intellectual exchanges needed to bring it about. This belief is expressed in and encouraged by the interfaith movement.

What is happening in the interfaith movement is the building of a transitional subculture that is offering a view of the world and religion that has not heretofore existed. A clear choice is being offered to all religious people as to how they will understand their religions and, thus, themselves: as healers of division within their own religion and among religions. This is a choice that, if not taken, will probably lead to the diminishment of the classical religions because the world is changing and with it the context of religion. A religion may change by isolating itself from the change, by total acceptance of the change, or by adapting to the change. There is no choice regarding change. Interpretation, which is always happening, depends upon the time, place, and language of the interpreter. When any one of these three changes, the interpretation changes—even when the printed words of a text remain the same. The subculture that I have sketched is a beginning of adaptation to that change in this liminal age. It is a subculture that promises freedom of religion for the seventy-five percent of the world’s population that lives in mandated uniformity of thought and religion<sup>15</sup>—a subculture that promises an increase of peace and justice as a consequence of dialogue among religious peoples.

The result of the dialectic from old to new is a culture with many subcultures that reflects, for a while, the stability and the recognized signposts that

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<sup>14</sup>A summary of the research dealing with technological change may be found in “Old Fogies by Their 20’s” in the Ideas and Trends section, *The New York Times*, January 10, 2010, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>See [http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/?utm\\_source=rss](http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/?utm_source=rss).

provide individuals and groups of individuals with the needed security for healthy living. A carefully chosen religious life is essential to living in a transitional culture. Such a life offers us a sense of identity—a set of connections to where, when, and who we are and wish to be. It is only in being connected that we build a religious life. Making and/or recognizing lasting connections in a liminal age is a monumental task that must be advanced on many fronts, one of which may be found in the interfaith movement.

#### IV. Interfaith Dialogue: Modern and Liminal

Faith is a powerful force for good or evil in both individual and communal life. When all the historical analysis, social science research, and philosophical reflections are done, the fact remains that the term “religion” does point to a deep human reality that impels us to significant moral and ritual action in response to foundational life questions. Self-identified religious people have created many of the great intellectual and artistic works of humankind. Interfaith dialogue’s goal is to harness this power for good. This harnessing occurs today within at least two contexts: modern and liminal.

The modern and pre-modern contexts see the world as a set of monocultural tribes who, tolerating each other, come together in dialogue or conversation to deal with a specific issue; the liminal context sees the world as sets of ever-changing individuals coming together to know and understand each other’s religious perspectives and to deal with the issue(s) at hand. In both instances the unity of religious people in common action for the common good should be of benefit to the society in which they reside. The depth of the conversation and its ability to modify the behavior of those gathered seem to favor the liminal context rather than the modern one because of the inherent presuppositions of the current interfaith dialogue movement.

##### *A. Modern*

The reason for such “favor” lies in the static reductionist nature of the modern context. For example, the older religious institutions, which represent the majority of humankind, have become identified with the reductionist and rationalist absolutes of modernity and pre-modernity. Over the centuries they have become hardened (institutionalized) into accepting the most recent particularization of their faith as normative for all time, and

they reject the current liminal context for interfaith dialogue as relativistic, humanistic, secularist, and just plain false in its goals and means to bring about these goals. Many from the former Western colonies see dialogue as a new form of Western imperialism, colonization, or evangelization.

Some of those who reject the contemporary interfaith movement do enter into interfaith dialogue from a modern perspective wherein they tolerate other faith perspectives within the conversation because it is the only way to achieve certain goals. We see, for example, interfaith gatherings to argue for a family-values agenda for all government agencies. The interfaith dialogue occurs to achieve the success of this agenda, while the participants spend little time on getting to know each other's religious views or seeking conversations with those outside their own conversation group who might view things differently. All three types of interfaith dialogue mentioned in the introductory paragraphs can be done with mutual tolerance (not necessarily empathy) of all concerned. The representatives of each faith enter into a dialogue in which they acknowledge a type of tribal pluralism wherein each person present enters into the discussion as representing a sort of religious tribe with identical beliefs, rituals, moral imperatives, and communal arrangements. Each person is seen as a representative of this tribe. Every speaker's description of her or his own religion is accepted as the view of everyone within that religion (tribe).

In order to sustain this normativity, the institutions, and sometimes their representatives, enter into what might be called false dialogue. Consequently, the dialogue is inauthentic within a contemporary liminal context. The conversation is such that there is little empathy for each other, while evident tribalism and peace and justice are accepted as attitudes of momentary satisfaction among the conversation partners, who are happy that they have delayed the threatening topic of conversation (in our above example what is seen as a secular family agenda) from becoming part of public policy. The common good is identified with what those in the conversation agree is common and good. For example, when an interfaith dialogue dealing with poverty results in the satisfaction of all the participants when their religion, without reference to others, reaches an accommodation among themselves for division of public and charitable monies. False dialogue, then, occurs when one or all the partners enter into conversation to show the interested public that they really believe in peace and sharing—when they do not.

False dialogue happens when one or some of those in the conversation use the time to delay any decision-making that effects systemic change, with the conviction that in the near or distant future they would have enough power to force everyone to follow their religious laws and ritual holidays. False dialogue occurs when one engages in dialogue for the benefit of one's self or one's religion with little concern for those outside the conversation. False dialogue is a reflection of the religious narcissism so prevalent during the modern era and so destructive of building a pluralistic community of peace and justice.

### ***B. Liminal***

Interfaith dialogue, whether modern or liminal, is entered into in order to change the *status quo*. The reason that people that are talking about a certain topic is to cause a change in themselves and/or society at large. That means, whether they admit it or not, that those engaged in the conversation wish to see things differently in the future. Over a prolonged period of time we can be sure that those who are involved will change in their relationship to each other—one hopes for the better. At the same time, as already mentioned, life in a liminal epoch is filled with change. It must be taken for granted that every person entering into the interfaith-dialogue movement is also entering into a series of identity-changing events.<sup>16</sup> Inherent to interfaith dialogue in the liminal age is identity-change and its religious manifestations.

In a liminal age we grow in awareness that things cannot continue the way they are economically, environmentally, unjustly, and within a context of continual war and terror. Mystery and paradox are part of the darkness of the night into which we are entering. To admit mystery is to admit that each of us is limited in our perspective of both past and future. An admission of mystery is essential not only for interfaith dialogue but also for every religion. Religion begins in mystery and ends in mystery. Faith and hope sustain us in the midst of mystery. So, too, for paradox. In the modern age of extreme rationality and unrestricted logic, every paradox was seen as capable of a rational solution. In an age of liminality, paradoxes inherent to each

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<sup>16</sup>For the development of religious identity, see David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago; San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 65–71. For the presence of multiple identities in contemporary society, see Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

religious way of life must once more be accepted, and the easy rational solutions that caused so much division in the past must be allowed to remain in the past. Paradoxes such as I am an immortal who dies; I need a “we” to be a me; I am one and many; my spiritual life is both free and earned; I am the same and different—all must be allowed to remain in mystery as dialogue continues among religious people in this, the liminal age.<sup>17</sup>

Admitting the existence of unsolvable mystery and constant paradox means that an apophatic approach is always an important part of interfaith conversations. Cataphatic descriptions of religious realities are important; apophatic ones are essential. We know much less than we claim about God or transcendent existence. An acknowledgement of that ignorance and a careful delineation of it are important not only for contemporary religions to sustain their identity in a liminal age but also for interfaith dialogue to deal with the descriptions of one’s individual religious perspective.

We are all equal in interfaith dialogue because we all stand embraced by the mystery that surrounds and penetrates us. We stand hand-in-hand in the liminal times, convinced that there is more beyond the liminality of the present. Thus, we stand in empathy for each other because we sense the same unknowns and the same necessities to move beyond the chaos of the present through the transcending rituals, beliefs, and morals present in the religious communities within which we find our homes. The individual histories of each religion—told by both the victors and vanquished in intrareligious controversies—are living records of how each religion has lived in and through past liminal times. Such stories should be part of any interfaith dialogue today.

Contemporary interfaith dialogue has accepted as essential to its existence a growing presupposition among both religious and nonreligious people that religion should foster peace.<sup>18</sup> Interfaith embeds in its goals this

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<sup>17</sup>Archbishop Rowan Williams sees paradox, mystery, and metaphor as inherent in the linguistic process itself. Engagement in dialogue among religions would certainly also possess such characteristics. See Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). For a detailed description of these paradoxes, see Nathan R. Kollar, *Spiritualities: Past, Present, and Future* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace, 2012).

<sup>18</sup>Religion and the Public Sphere, a program of the Social Science Research Council (<http://www.ssrc.org/programs/religion-and-the-public-sphere/>) is a good starting point for reviewing this role of religion. The World Assembly of Religion for Peace is one place in which this works out in practice (<http://www.religionsforpeaceinternational.org/vision-history/world-assemblies>).

presupposition as a principle function of its dialogue: Religions are forces for peacemaking. True dialogue, from the interfaith perspective, cannot occur without fostering peace in the dialogue process itself, because dialogue demands listening—which is the seed of a peaceful society.

The nature of the conversation itself provides important contours for interfaith dialogue because, when humans gather together to talk about something, for that “talk” to be successful they must listen, agree, settle conflict, and act in a cohesive way. This essential constituent of every conversation is, at the same time, a seed of peace that should be part of every conversation, not only interfaith ones. For dialogue to be successful at whatever level, good listening has to occur. This is an ability to attend to the whole person, body, mind, and spirit. It demands we be silent and listen to silence; we hear the words the other utters as valuable; we see the actions that a person makes as conveyers of meaning; we honor the thoughts one expresses as sacred to him or her. It demands we honor one’s ideas as well as one’s feelings. The “faith” dimension of the person cannot be factored out from the necessary rubrics of human conversation. That means that interfaith dialogue cannot occur if we refuse to hear our conversation partner’s religious words as valuable, actions as meaningful, sacred ideas as actually sacred, and the person him or herself as truth-filled as myself. Those engaged in interfaith dialogue in a liminal context accept the above descriptions as a necessary part of their process.

The interfaith-dialogue movement in the current liminal age, consequently, is composed of conversations among diverse religious people that seek mutual religious knowledge in order to bring about peace locally and globally. It does not exist without the equality, empathy, pluralism, and growth found in every prolonged conversation. It does not exist without an acknowledgement of the mystery and paradox inherent to religious life and knowledge and a willingness to focus on the apophatic rather than the cataphatic. Interfaith dialogue cannot exist without a willingness among all its participants to change both personally and culturally. These are the essential constituents of interfaith dialogue in a liminal age.

## V. Institutionalization

I would wager that many reading this essay have undergone (suffered?) the rationalization processes associated with institutionalization—especially writing and/or rewriting a mission statement, selecting goals and principles in relation to that mission statement, then clearly indicating how your syllabus aligns with that same mission statement and its goals and principles. The difference, of course, between undergoing this process as an advocate of interfaith dialogue and as a representative of the traditional social sciences and liberal arts is that the latter are already institutionalized and professionalized as indicated by the existence of professional organizations, journals, established departments, and decades, if not centuries in some instances, spent advocating this mission. The same is not true for interfaith dialogue. With interfaith dialogue one enters into an atmosphere of biases associated with religion in general and specific religions in particular within the academic community. Even with a perfectly formulated mission statement, etc., a person seeking a grant or approval for program or departmental status enters into an atmosphere that is not only liminal but also populated with very opinioned people who lack, in most cases, even a rudimentary knowledge of faith, religion, and religions<sup>19</sup> and who are easily part of the growing number of “nones” among us.<sup>20</sup>

In what follows, I will bring together everything I have said so far about the interfaith movement with two experiences of institutionalization in which I have participated over the last ten years.<sup>21</sup> The most recent is the struggle to attain academic status for the Hickey Center for Interfaith Study and Dialogue at Nazareth College, Rochester, New York.<sup>22</sup> The other was the facilitation of an eighteen-month Wabash Institute Grant titled “Peda-

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<sup>19</sup>See Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

<sup>20</sup>“Nones” are those who claim to belong to no religion. See this Pew Forum site for Canadian material as well as comparisons with U.S. demographics on the same topic: <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape/> (“Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape”).

<sup>21</sup>I would be remiss in not mentioning both these two experiences and the fact that I taught a course on Educational Management and Human Relations for over twenty years at the University of Rochester’s graduate school of education (where I also underwent the same rationalization process several times in the department’s accreditation process).

<sup>22</sup>The Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue came to the campus of Nazareth College in 2004 under the able leadership of Dr. Mohammad Shafiq. Both he and I started the



gogies of the Oppositional Religious Other,”<sup>23</sup> which gathered the chairs of four departments of religious studies and the academic deans of three seminaries in the Rochester metropolitan area. This team sought to describe those “others” who were religiously marginal to the majority of students in their institution and to create an institutional atmosphere that recognized them as important members of the academic community as well as to enable the majority students to acknowledge the importance of those who differed from them religiously. Bringing together the theory of the first part of this essay with practice as found in these two experiences should offer readers the tools with which to advance the institutionalization of the interfaith movement.

### *A. Institutionalization in Practice: Who Are We?*

Movements gather many symbols to argue against what they are certain is destructive of the common good. The rationalization in the institutionalization process gradually reduces the multiple meanings inherent in a symbol to one or two easily understood positive statements of what this program, course, or department is and will do in the academic institution. This is the process through which every movement must go upon entering an academic institution. Black studies, gender studies, gerontology, peace studies, and religious studies have gone through this process. They have struggled to articulate who they are and what they intend to do in the academic institution. They have found that it is easy to be against something; it is difficult to articulate clearly what they are for, besides ridding the culture of what they consider ideas and actions destructive of the common good.

Wrestling with one’s personal or social identity is always a challenge. When one is part of a movement, a search for identity or mission is both personal and communal. As such, the process will be deeply emotional as well as divisive. As the many meanings present in the symbols inherent in the movement begin to be reduced to secondary status, those individuals to

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Center in 1999, while I was chair of the Religious Studies Department at St. John Fisher College in Rochester.

<sup>23</sup>Nathan R. Kollar, “Pedagogies of the Oppositional Religious Other: Theory and Practice” (ED497739) at ERIC (*Education Resources Information Center*), 2007; available at <http://eric.ed.gov/?q=Pedagogies+of+the+Oppositional+Religious+Other&id=ED497739>. Aside from the narrative found at this place, one also finds a more detailed listing of what follows in the present essay.

whom these meanings were primary in their identification with the movement begin to feel abandoned, ignored, and somewhat angry about what is happening. The loss of membership in the movement is not unusual as it begins to be institutionalized.<sup>24</sup>

So what is the interfaith movement as distinguished from other interdisciplinary programs that deal with religions individually and comparatively? What is it that distinguishes it from other courses of study that deal with peace and conflict? What is interfaith dialogue in these liminal times? Remember that in making the following statement there will be interfaith programs, entities, and advocates using this name that will not be included in what follows; that is the nature of the rationalization process inherent in the institutionalization of a movement. I take for granted, especially in an interfaith context, that any mission statement is written in committee.

A mission statement for Interfaith Studies should always include the following points:

1. Interfaith dialogue deals with religions individually and comparatively from the perspective of diverse fields of study such as sociology, political science, literature, theology, and religious studies. It is interdisciplinary.

2. Its purpose is to bring individuals and institutions together in conversation for mutual understanding and action to benefit the common good of which knowledge, peace, and empathy for each other are of primary importance.

3. At a minimum, it studies and seeks to understand this purpose through all the disciplines that now study religion and religions, while hoping to develop new methods of research and bodies of knowledge unique to interfaith to implement this seeking.

4. In such study the acquisition of factual knowledge of religions includes the admission of mystery and paradox as inherent to our understanding of religions in general and each religion in particular.

5. It accepts change as inherent in all religious manifestations and seeks to identify religious change as it occurs within individuals and religious communities.

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<sup>24</sup>The struggle for clear definitions and titles descriptive of what I call the “interfaith movement” is easily seen as one reads the electronic and print journals associated with the movement. The Wikipedia entry for “interfaith dialogue” is a good example of the search for exact meaning, as it suggests diverse names for the movement ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interfaith\\_dialogue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interfaith_dialogue)).

6. The recognition of equality among all and empathy for all are both necessary and advocated in all religious encounters titled interfaith. This is not an advocacy of easy relativism, for it recognizes, as David Tracy has said: “Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.”<sup>25</sup>

7. It recognizes and accepts the need for accountability in the manner in which it describes the various religions as well as the content of each description.

8. It is distinguished from other disciplines by its necessary inclusion of the primacy of mystery, paradox, and empathy in its selection, dissemination, and interchanges of information and by methodologies particular to its field of study.

### ***B. Institutionalization in Practice: What Do We Do?***

Bringing interfaith on campus challenges the campus itself to acknowledge religious diversity as a necessary part of the institution. Space limitations prevent me from providing a detailed discussion of how an institution goes about establishing an interfaith program or department and encouraging others within the institution to abide by the necessary valuing of religious diversity. Instead, I will list below six foundational questions that must be asked and provide some answers to these questions.<sup>26</sup>

*1. How should we treat the differing views in our institutions and classrooms, and what should we do to ensure that we encourage dialogue rather than diatribe in the class?*

We should take into account:

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<sup>25</sup>Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup>See Kollar, “Pedagogies of the Oppositional Religious Other,” for a ten-page response to these questions. Aside from the syllabi found in this document, there are numerous syllabi and discussions surrounding interfaith found at the Wabash Center-AAR syllabi project, housed at [http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide\\_syllabi.aspx](http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide_syllabi.aspx).

(a) The various types of students in our classrooms: those who are secure and at ease with the language and presuppositions of our classes, and those without formal religious experience or training, who are insecure and uncertain about the language and presuppositions present in our classrooms. Subsets within each of the above are: the very certain students, the everything-is-relative students, the seekers, the students from mixed religious backgrounds.

(b) The purpose and mission of the institution.

(c) The difference between a graduate and undergraduate institution. Graduate schools of theology and ministry have an obligation to form students in the tradition that they represent, while treating all equally, with respect, with honor, and without bias. Undergraduate institutions have an obligation to provide more of an “objective” presentation of views.

(d) The developmental nature of student learning as well as the life-experiences of those involved in the classroom encounters.

(e) We should treat each religious view/voice appropriately:

1. By acknowledging the view (religion) as the speaker intends.
2. By providing a space and time for interaction between those who hold these views/lead these ways of life.

3. By establishing an atmosphere of respectful dialogue—for example, by beginning with “In my opinion . . .” or “Today, I think . . .”

4. By recognizing voices representative of current or past religious views or ways of life as truly authoritative because of those they represent. For example, “This view is Lutheran/Muslim. Here is where you can find out more about it.” Support them as legitimate positions that people of good heart and mind could hold, with a substantial following despite their minority status in this class, institution, or culture.

5. By not pandering or speaking in a condescending manner but by providing respect, shown through critical questioning.

6. By allowing diversity to emerge.

7. By establishing a process with the students, within the classroom, for what to do, what to do when everything is okay, what to do when it is not okay. This is in response to strong disagreement about a religious issue.

8. By providing the necessary temporal or physical space to respond, for example, by saying, “We’ll deal with this next class/week. Till

then think about the best way of dealing with this way of seeing things.” Many teachers want to “fix things” immediately, when many things in life take time.

(f) Not tolerance but empathy should be the rule. Tolerance says, “We’ll accept you, but we’re better.” Empathy shows appreciation, seeks common ground with the other(s), and imaginatively enters into the “world” of the other.

*2. What are the necessary materials, pedagogies, and social interactions we should encourage in our schools in order to provide students with a broad view of what is happening in our surrounding religious world that forms the foundation for dialogue?*

(a) We should bring representatives of other religious ways of life into the classroom in person or through means of various media.

(b) We should encourage student use of the Internet in order for them to come into contact with and/or deepen their knowledge and awareness of religious others.

(c) We should facilitate student visits to religious places of worship, activities, and places of learning and work.

(d) We should provide panels available to the public with a variety of religious experts and representatives of various religious ways of life, so that both students and the interested public may encounter each other.

(e) We should make available all-school worship and/or gatherings for worship by each religious group in the institution, including, for example, the prayer/*salat* of Muslims five times a day, or some Christians praying the Angelus.

(f) We should support study abroad for long or short periods of time. These periods of study should include, as part of the program, reflection on the religious dimension of the cultures with which they are engaged.

(g) We should provide financial assistance for gatherings of autobiographical materials representative of a variety of religious ways of life.

(h) We should both recognize and encourage student reflection on what they have encountered.

(i) We should be vocal supporters of library budgets that provide various points of view.

(j) We should provide examples of the power and functional success of the “other” point of view in people’s lives.

(k) We should do the same for those from the more “familiar” traditions; the “familiar” religious tradition in one school is not necessarily the familiar tradition in the other schools.

(l) Pedagogies should be interactive and varied and should encourage intellectual experimentation and dissent, take imaginative leaps into other perspectives, and set perspectives within sociohistorical contexts.

*3. When we allow different voices into our institutions and classrooms, or encourage our students to visit those who are different from themselves, what should be done about the possible dangers and limits to this exposure?*

(a) Possible dangers: Most of the time there are no imminent threats to students’ physical, psychological, social, and spiritual welfare. However, education itself may be dangerous to some, anxiety-filled for many, and an energizing, freeing leap to new life for some.

If one is engaged in education—especially a liberal-arts education that includes theology/religious studies—one enters into a time and place of liminality (Victor Turner). Liminality is inherently dangerous as one traverses from one or several points of view to others. Some movement from one to another may involve a movement from one horizon to another—that is, a conversion experience (Bernard Lonergan). Physical, social, mental, and spiritual dangers surround those in a state of liminality. The question is not one of avoidance of dangers but of how to cope with them.

All the ordinary means of dealing with such dangers in life should be used here. The typical responses to danger such as fight, flight, adaptation, and boredom should be discussed if necessary. Unless one becomes involved with religions that are anti-social and/or criminal in behavior, the most obvious response is curiosity, which is also a healthy emotion to cultivate and reflect upon.

(b) The limits: Opinionated words and actions are limited by the demands of evidence and proof by the academic community, among which is critical reasoning; the necessity of hospitality and manners toward all; the requirements of dialogue; the importance of honoring the person while disagreeing with her or his claim; the importance of being open to all views

presented without turning the principle of openness into an absolute, demanding anarchy; and individual conscience.

The human limitation is that one can only do so much, believe so much, know so much. Humans are limited creatures.

*4. What are the necessary materials that the teacher should share with the students before they experience those who are marginal to the majority by means of either a visit to their place of worship or service to those in need?*

(a) The preparation and sharing in order to encounter the other is similar to the teacher's preparation for encountering any new source of information and experience. These may be any or a combination of what is itemized here:

1. Provide nothing—allow the encounter to take place without any “bias” provided by the teacher.

2. Provide some written or media source to be read, listened to, and/or seen that reviews what the students will encounter before going to experience the religious other.

3. Orally provide the categories for interpretation and examples.

4. Provide a checklist in writing to be used in providing a response to the encounter.

5. Provide nothing, but require a journal entry or some other means of free writing to reflect and express the results of the encounter.

(b) Require a group discussion about the encounter. Require a written, oral, individual, and/or group in-class feedback. This may also be done by means of other electronic media.

*5. What is the minimum number of interreligious voices and intrareligious voices that are necessary in every curriculum in our respective institutions and in theology and religious studies in general?*

This is not so much the quantity but the quality of engagement with the other. In order for learning to take place, the following must be taken into consideration: an ability to demonstrate an understanding of the other's words and actions; a sense of empathy with the other; an ability to compare and contrast one's way of life with the other's way of life; an ability to read

their writings, to share their worship imaginatively, to engage in their polity, and to accept their moral perspectives as one's own; to recognize oneself as an "other"; an ability to listen and to question and to deal with contemporary religious pluralism.

*6. What are some pedagogical affirmations that are supportive of marginal voices in the theology/religious studies/religion/philosophy/interfaith curriculum?*

(a) A sense of hospitality, civility, and respect should pervade our institutional culture.

(b) The presence of marginal voices in the curriculum enhances an understanding of one's faith life.

(c) The curriculum should foster an understanding of diverse ideas, beliefs, and practices.

(d) While acknowledging, respecting, and providing support for each voice, we should also acknowledge, respect, and provide support for the ties that bind us together as both an academic and a human community.

(e) While acknowledging that we should focus on the communal traditions that characterize our academic institution, we also acknowledge that these same traditions are marginal voices in other contexts.

(f) The discussion and analysis of these voices should use the methods and language of the academy in general and the method and language of the proper academic discipline in particular.

(g) Time for reflection, discussion, and analysis should be allowed for each voice—minimally, time for directed reflection must be encouraged for each voice that speaks.

(h) Part of the process of listening to, reflection upon, and analysis of marginal voices should also include what is common to all voices.

(i) Faculty and staff should model constructive ways of engaging other voices.

(j) The curriculum should include learning objectives that challenge the institution to put these pedagogical affirmations into practice.

(k) Appropriate assessment procedures should be established to evaluate whether these pedagogical affirmations are operative throughout the curriculum.



## Conclusion

The aims of this essay are to add to the discussions about the purpose of the interfaith movement, to emphasize the necessity of carrying on those discussions within an understanding of the liminal age in which we live, and to provide particular suggestions for enabling the results of these discussions to be fleshed out in mission statements and other documents associated with institutionalization. I hope that these intentions have been fulfilled.

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