

Humility at the Heart of Interreligious Education

Henry S. Kuo

As I move toward the completion of my doctoral work at the GTU, I am increasingly musing over questions about the nature of education—and particularly the nature of interreligious education. I believe teaching is part of my calling as a theologian, as it is for so many others here at the GTU. Often, we educators are concerned about pedagogy, about certain teaching and learning strategies, as well as more mechanical questions concerning syllabus construction, what readings to include, and whether dialogical approaches are more effective than lecture and discussion. But there's a more essential question I believe we should ask first: *What sorts of people do we want to come out of our classes?* It is easy to assume we all know the answer to this question, but we need to deconstruct this a bit, because the character of the people we hope to produce shapes the content of our classes and syllabi.

This question of character is more important than ever. In Confucius's time, the question of character weighed most heavily on the figure of the Emperor; the Emperor's authority was derived from heaven, and was contingent upon his or her character. The Emperor's lack of character would be matched by the requisite judgment from heaven, usually in the form of regime change. In 1927, the people of China took matters into their own hands and said, "No, thanks," to the corruption within the imperial administration. Hence, the Chinese Civil War that led to the Republic of China, and then to the People's Republic of China.

In a liberal democracy such as ours, the question of character weighs most heavily on the people, and we often assume, perhaps to our own detriment, that "we the people" possess the character and the vocabulary necessary to ensure a responsible democracy. The November 2016 elections have demonstrated that this assumption needs serious revision and critique; in the aftermath, our nation's dangerous memories of colonialism, racism, and violence against the marginalized have been resurrected into dangerous realities.

In the field of education, character is often shaped by the implicit or unspoken content of our pedagogies and curricula. So part of our duty, as theological educators, is to literally be a light in the midst of darkness by bringing the dangerous

memories of our traditions and cultures into the light, so we can name and confess our sins, repent of them, and join in works of reconciliation and reconstruction.

The more specific question regarding the nature of *interreligious* education is an important concept that we at the GTU must work through rigorously. The worst kind of interreligiosity is one that aims for a thin and shallow exposure to the buffet of religions available in the religious marketplace, and ill-informed scholars are encouraged to pick and choose whatever they like from any religion and add it to their plates. But look beneath such buffet religiosity and you'll discover a religious neoliberalism in which the fundamentalist epistemology of the infallible self is the basis of religious reflection—if such reflection takes place at all. In our time of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, and misogyny, such religious neoliberalism is the last thing we need.

Unfortunately, such attitudes are quite commonplace among religious and theological research. During my three years as editor of the *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology*, we've had to turn down several submissions that provided "critical" inquiry based on caricatured versions of different religions. This shallow approach to interreligiosity is one the GTU aims to resist as strongly as possible.

But what character does an interreligious education aspire toward? This is an ontological question that structures the required classes we teach. Of course, we can't teach everything within the span of a few months. But what are we leaving out, and why? And does our implicit or null curriculum support the interreligious character formation our programs seek to cultivate, or work against it?

Now, I can't answer on behalf of all religions—or even on behalf of all Christians. But let me venture one possible answer—and note that this is *my* answer, not the official GTU answer. I believe theological education should inculcate the virtue of humility before that which we are studying. This is precisely what Stanley Hauerwas said in an interview on religious pluralism and interreligious work. The point of interreligious work, he says, is not a *kum-ba-ya* toleration—because one can only tolerate the other from a hegemonic position. The interreligious scholarship we need—and the kind I believe the GTU strives for—cultivates a humility when encountering other traditions. Within such an approach, we all do the work necessary to get a glimpse, as best we can, of other traditions from their points of view, and to see how they see us. When done well, this sort of education forms us into humble and hospitable scholars, by apprenticing ourselves to the wisdom and experiences of the religious, cultural, and social Other. Christian-Muslim dialogical work, for example, is a mutual invitation to sit at the feet of the wisdom of ancestors, to converse with wisdom and also to glean from it so we can confront the dangerous memories of our cultures and traditions in ways we could not do on our own. It is an intensely dialogical exercise requiring a lot of work from all involved. But when done well, this is what gives us the courage to stand in meaningful and effective solidarity with *all* our neighbors, particularly those under attack by oppressive regimes.

Let me close with a story from a movie. In the movie *Hero*, Jet Li plays an unnamed Hero who is sent to assassinate the Emperor of China. In the pivotal scene of the film, the Emperor examines a calligraphy the Hero has brought which reads *Jian* (“sword”). The Emperor declares that the calligraphy reveals the swordsman's highest ideal in stages. In the basic stage, warrior and sword become one so that even a blade of grass can become a weapon. In a higher stage, the warrior's sword rests in his heart so he can slay his enemy without any weapon. But the ultimate ideal is when the sword disappears altogether. The warrior embraces all around him, and the desire to kill no longer appears and peace remains. The ideal vision of just war, to paraphrase Mengzi, is harmonious peace.



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But to attain this harmonious peace, the warrior must submit to the greatness and force of the ideal. He or she must be humble before it. And, I suppose, that this is what interreligious education does. When done poorly, religion becomes a deadly weapon. Base fears are inflamed, reason is summarily dismissed, and walls of oppression in literal and political forms are quickly erected as security trumps rights and freedoms. But when done with humility, interreligious education disabuses the world of dangerous stereotypes. Dividing walls are torn down, and reason gives way to reconciliation. When practiced with the diligence, skill, and mastery it demands, interreligious education deepens our own traditions, making religion and theology become critical aspects for human flourishing. And, to quote the GTU's familiar tagline, what better way is there for “religion to meet the world”? ♦

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