

A Sacred Duty

A Conversation with President Daniel Lehmann

Our new president shares thoughts on interreligious education, diversity within community, and the mix of scholarship and religious commitment that makes the GTU unique.

Rabbi Daniel L. Lehmann became the eighth president in the fifty-six-year history of the Graduate Theological Union when he took office on August 1, 2018. President Lehmann brings to the GTU a profound passion for interreligious dialogue and scholarship, an entrepreneurial spirit, and significant background in program development, fundraising, and student recruitment. He has more than thirty years of experience as a leader and educator within the Jewish community, most recently as the president of Hebrew College outside Boston, where he also served as professor of pluralism and chaired the board of trustees of the multireligious Boston Theological Institute. *SKYLIGHT* is happy to share this conversation with the GTU's new president.

Tell us a little bit about yourself. How do your interests, background, and past experiences prepare you to serve as president of the GTU?

For the past thirty years, my career has focused on pluralistic Jewish education. The teachers who have most influenced my professional life have been theologians whose commitment to pluralism within the Jewish community led them to explore and engage the ideas, texts, and thinkers of other faiths.

I have been passionately interested in interreligious education since I participated in a Jewish-Catholic colloquium sponsored by the Lilly Foundation more than twenty-five years ago while I was living and working in Baltimore. Ever since, I have sought out opportunities to engage in interreligious dialogue, learning, and experiences that have expanded my religious horizons and brought me into contact with stimulating religious partners. During my time as president at Hebrew College, my involvement with the Boston Theological Institute as a member and chair of

its board of trustees provided experience in leading an interreligious consortium of theological schools and institutions. More generally, I see myself as an educational entrepreneur who believes deeply in developing bold visions that can transform the trajectory of academic institutions.

What has surprised you most during the first few months of your presidency?

The interconnectedness of the various institutions that make up the GTU is remarkable and something I did not fully appreciate before meeting faculty and administrators. So many people teaching and leading at the various GTU member schools and affiliates are GTU alumni. There is a great deal of affection and commitment to the GTU that is a natural outgrowth of having studied here.

I have also been most pleasantly surprised by the diversity of the student body and the number of different states, countries, and cultures represented. The



President Lehmann speaks with doctoral students. Photo by Dana Davis

GTU is truly a global community of scholars, learners, and leaders, and the cosmopolitan environment is incredibly exciting.

In what ways are the challenges at the GTU similar to what you faced as president of Hebrew College? In what ways are they different?

Hebrew College was in the throes of a major financial crisis due to its significant real-estate debt and bloated budget when I took over the leadership, and I needed to take drastic action in order to keep the institution afloat. Thankfully, the same issues of overwhelming debt and overspending do not exist at the GTU. But we do face financial challenges that we need to address, especially when it comes to student financial support and academic program endowments.

The Boston Theological Institute faced challenges similar to the GTU in that the needs of individual institutions often made it difficult to prioritize the needs and opportunities of the consortium. However, the common degree programs and close connections

among the schools at the GTU generate a cross-institutional collaboration that is much more intense and powerful than what I experienced in the Boston area. My experience with both institutions in Boston have taught me negotiation, diplomacy, and fundraising skills that I think will prove helpful as I navigate the complexities of the GTU.

What most excites you about the Graduate Theological Union? What concerns you?

I am most excited about the opportunity to share the GTU's distinctive interreligious conversation and the deep scholarship we nurture here with expanding concentric circles of learners. The GTU has so much talent within its faculty and student body that can engage people from across the religious-secular spectrum. As I meet our faculty and students, I am incredibly impressed by the sophistication of their scholarship and their commitment to explore the theological questions at the core of the religious quest.

Our students and faculty need more support, and

that becomes a major focus on of my energies as president. Housing costs in Berkeley and throughout Northern California make it very difficult for our current faculty and graduate students, and make it more challenging to attract those who want to study and teach at the GTU. I want to develop creative solutions to address this very complex issue.

How does the diversity of the GTU create particular opportunities and challenges for you and for the school?

I believe the cultural and religious diversity of the GTU is among its greatest strengths. In my previous positions, pluralism was a key component of the mission, but the emphasis was on forms of Jewish pluralism. The GTU requires a much more expansive vision of pluralism, and that is both challenging and very exciting to me.

A multireligious community like the GTU creates exceptional opportunities to celebrate commonalities as well as to engage in serious conversations about difference. We are able to tackle difficult issues here, to engage in tough conversations, because we are devoted to one another's positive growth and development. True pluralism demands both a commitment to particularity and an openness to hearing others, including those with whom we may have serious disagreements. I believe we are able to discern the divine voice more fully by hearing a multiplicity of human perspectives.

It is one of my top priorities to nurture a GTU culture in which every voice is valued and respected, in which we can push one another in an atmosphere of trust and open inquiry. I feel blessed to be leading an academic community where interreligious conversations already happen regularly, and I consider it a sacred duty to sustain and encourage such a spirit throughout the GTU.

You are the first GTU president whose primary religious background isn't Christian. In your opinion, why is this significant for the GTU?

The fact that the GTU hired a rabbi and life-long Jewish educator is a strong endorsement of the GTU's commitment to interreligious learning and leadership. GTU was founded in the early 1960s as an ecumenical bridge between Catholics and Protestants. But the interreligious conversation at the GTU began early in its



history with the establishment of the Center for Jewish Studies in 1968, and has continued to grow through nearly four decades of affiliation with the Institute of Buddhist Studies, the creation of the Center for Islamic Studies in 2007, and the founding of the Center for Dharma Studies in 2015. These centers have brought world-class scholars and students from numerous traditions to the GTU.

As we make our way through the twenty-first century, America is becoming much more religiously, ethnically, and culturally diverse. The GTU's evolution and expansion to include Eastern and Western religious traditions is a recognition of the need to widen the bridge and allow for a more complex conversation. By choosing a president from a minority religious tradition, the GTU is making a bold statement about the need for openness to religious diversity and difference.

After thirty years of working to strengthen the Jewish community through education, I feel blessed to be in a position to support and lead the process of interreligious learning that is at the center of GTU's mission and to help shape the future of interreligious engagement in this country and around the world. I am grateful for the religious freedom that has been a hallmark of our American democracy and want to ensure that the religious freedom we enjoy here can be the catalyst for profound



understanding of ourselves and the many religious others with whom we inhabit the earth.

You have considerable experience with Jewish-Christian dialogue. How does this shape your approach as a rabbi leading a consortium where most member schools are from the Christian tradition?

My various experiences learning with and from Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, have nurtured a deep and profound respect and admiration for Christianity. I have developed what the Swedish theologian Krister Stendhal referred to as “holy envy.” Through these life-changing encounters, I have come to love exploring many diverse religious thinkers, communities, and ways of living in the presence of the Divine. Christianity, and the generous Christian scholars and leaders who served as my guides, mentors, and study partners, showed me a path of interreligious learning on which I will continue to journey for the rest of my life.

The GTU’s Christian roots and majority culture has created a hospitable environment for the world’s religions to learn and live together in mutual respect and understanding. At the GTU, the religious traditions are not homogenized and reduced to reflections of some single, majority religious culture. Respect for

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difference and diversity are hallmarks of the GTU. I am committed to continue the tradition of openness, generosity, and hospitality established by my Christian predecessors.

You have said you believe creativity is a “religious imperative.” What do you mean by that? How does this commitment to creativity shape your approach as GTU president?

I view human creativity as a divine gift and an invitation to partner with the Divine in perfecting the world. It is my firm belief that religious traditions have the capacity to unleash and inspire powerful creative resources within the human mind, heart, and soul. The GTU is an environment in which the creative impulses that lie deep within the different religious traditions of the world come to the surface and interact with one another in ways that expand the creative potential at the core of our humanity. We need to find new ways to share the creative juices that flow from our traditions and help them interact to generate new forms of creative, religious expression.

You’ve spoken about your desire to expand the reach of the GTU. How do you hope to do that?

One way is through digital media and online learning platforms. We are living in an era in which the cell phone is the most ubiquitous and powerful portal to learning, and the GTU should take full advantage of the digital opportunities. The global village is connected digitally in ways that provide great opportunity for the GTU to reach many more people and deepen our impact. We need expanded online programs that can serve students globally. Our exceptional library needs

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to have a larger digital footprint, and our accessibility to the broader public can grow exponentially through more online learning platforms. We can make more of the stimulating public programs the GTU sponsors available to a global audience via livestream and our website. Making our digital resources even more robust is an important way to advance our mission.

We also need to gather additional professional resources to focus on our marketing and institutional advancement functions. The GTU should be a larger presence in the interreligious communities of San Francisco and Silicon Valley in addition to our active programming in the East Bay. We also should expand our connections to the UC Berkeley community with more cosponsored programs and collaborations as well as proactive marketing of our programs to the Cal campus.

What would you say to a prospective student who is considering the GTU? Why should that student come to Berkeley?

First, the GTU is unique in that it values both rigorous scholarship as well as deep religious commitment. The environment created by those complementary values makes the learning at GTU compelling, personal, and transformative. The diversity of the students and faculty is unparalleled; the library resources are among the best in the world, and the variety of courses and perspectives is unmatched. The GTU offers exceptional opportunities to delve deeply into a single religious tradition or to engage in interreligious work. Through academic centers like the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences and the Center for the Arts & Religion, we are building interdisciplinary bridges between religious and secular fields of study. In addition, the collaborations and cross-registration with UC Berkeley bring even more opportunities for exceptional academic experiences. Berkeley itself is an incredibly beautiful and stimulating place to learn and live. The GTU is able to draw upon so many academic and religious institutions in the area; I think there is no better place to be if graduate religious and theological study is your passion.

You've arrived during a year when the GTU's Richard S. Dinner Center for Jewish Studies is celebrating its 50th anniversary. As the first Jewish president of the GTU, do you have particular hopes for the work of that center?

The Center for Jewish Studies has been a leader in the development of academic Jewish studies in this country. Our faculty have been prolific and prominent scholars who have produced important contributions to their fields and have attracted talented students. Many alumni hold prestigious academic appointments and share their passion for Jewish study in academic institutions and throughout the broader community. I want to ensure that CJS remains on the cutting-edge of scholarship and that it has an even greater impact throughout the community. The Madrasa-Midrasha program cosponsored by CJS and our Center for Islamic Studies offers numerous public events each year and is a paradigm of interreligious learning and conversation. I hope we can expand it and bring the program to more communities throughout the country and world.



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If your presidency is a success, what do you envision for the GTU ten years from now?

I envision that the GTU will be known throughout the world as the premier center for the study of religion and the acknowledged leader in interreligious learning. Scholarships and fellowships for students will increase. Our faculty will expand and be strengthened with more resources for academic programs. Our centers, schools, and affiliates will generate stimulating conversations and projects with the worlds of science, arts and humanities, law, education, and technology. We will have created an interreligious residential village for students and faculty that will be a model of interreligious learning and living. The GTU consortium of schools and affiliates will be more closely aligned, and the collaborations will strengthen the individual institutions as well the GTU as a whole. More people will participate in GTU programs, and we will generate a new interest in interreligious learning and conversation across the country and throughout the world. ♦