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Building Trust across Faith Lines

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Abstract

As educators, we seek to prepare students for a healthy and productive life in the contemporary world. Given the reality of religious diversity in this world, this paper offers two suggestions. First, the classroom should be utilized as a space where students can better understand their own views on spirituality as well as build bridges that enable meaningful interaction with others who hold views on spirituality that are different from their own. Second, in order to facilitate encounters with diverse beliefs, trust must be cultivated in the classroom, making it possible for students to learn about and interact hospitably with religious others.

Keywords: faith lines, spirituality, religions

In his famous commentary on the decline of social capital in contemporary America, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) imagines two possible solutions for reviving community life. One emphasizes creating and utilizing "bonding capital" by solidifying relationships with those who are most like us. The other alternative is to emphasize the creation of "bridging capital" by seeking diverse relationships beyond our immediate social networks. Although bonding capital is always necessary for a full and healthy life, Putnam maintains that "for our biggest collective problems we need precisely the sort of bridging social capital that it is toughest to create" (p. 363).

While bridging social capital certainly needs to be created amid the cultural and ethnic diversity of American society, this is particularly true in the face of growing religious strife in the contemporary world. In *Acts of Faith*, Eboo Patel (2007), founder and director of the Interfaith Youth Core, reflects on the issue of religious diversity. Mirroring W. E. B. Du Bois' famous statement that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," Patel suggests that "the twenty-first century will be shaped by the

question of the faith line" (p. xv). On one side of this line are those who are convinced that "only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth" (p. xv). On the other side are the "religious pluralists who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together" (p. xv). Despite the lines that divide people of various faiths, Patel (2012) notes that conflict between faiths is "far from inevitable" if we are willing to engage diversity in "deliberate and positive" ways (p. 69-70).

Like Patel, Putnam also recognizes the need for religious engagement in order to address the problems of the new century. In their recent book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unities Us,* Putnam and David Campbell (2010) urge:

> While religion is potentially divisive everywhere, the United States would appear to be a tinderbox for a religious conflagration. Many individual Americans are highly religious while, as a nation, America is religiously diverse—a potentially explosive combination . . . . Religious acceptance within the United States is tied to Americans' high level of interreligious association, of "bridging," whereby most of us live by, are friends with, or are even married to people of other faiths. As Americans build bridges across religious divides in different domains of their lives, they become more likely to accept those with different beliefs (p. 493-95).

Robert Nash (2008) does not use Putnam's language of "bonding" and "bridging," but he makes a similar point when he reminds us that we are each "not only a member of a particular community of belonging but also a citizen of the world," and as such, we have obligations to others "beyond our kith and kin" (p. 70). One such obligation, Nash continues, is "to be kind, even hospitable, to…'religious strangers' so that we might learn from them" (p. 71).

As educators, one of our essential goals is to prepare students for a healthy and productive life in the contemporary world. In order to do this well, we must be deliberate about addressing the issue of religious diversity, drawing from a variety of academic disciplines for theoretical framework, as a crucial part of developing intercultural competence. Navigating this issue requires that we think creatively about how to help students better understand their own views on spirituality as well as helping them learn to build bridges that enable meaningful interaction with others who hold views on spirituality that are different from their own. This means, first, that space must be made in the classroom for reflection on and writing about issues related to personal religion and spirituality, as well as navigating a society with a plurality of religious and non-religious views. Second, for this endeavor to succeed, trust must be cultivated in the classroom, making it possible for students to learn about and interact hospitably with religious others.

Religion in the Classroom

Seeking Holistic Education

Barr and Tagg's (1995) often-cited article describes the ongoing shift in American higher education toward a "learning paradigm" in which colleges seek to accomplish their missions by "creat[ing] a series of ever more powerful learning environments" (p. 15). Such an emphasis on learning environments is supported in various ways by several researchers, such as Astin (1993), Kuh (2005), Light (2001), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005). The general consensus? Learning is multifaceted and complex, occurring in and out of the classroom, with students seeking to make sense of all that they are encountering. This process of meaning-making, says Rice

(2008), and "depends in large measure on what the student brings to the learning situation—their personal, social, and cultural situation" (p. 108). Meaning-making, and the efforts of educators hoping to assist in this process, is necessarily holistic; incorporating aspects of both teachers and learners that are often ignored. Religious beliefs and spiritual convictions are among the areas often kept out of the classroom.

Because learning is a holistic process, we must do more than invest "our pedagogical effort in developing the student's cognitive, technical, and job skills," says Astin (2004, p. 36). We also, Astin (2004) asserts, need to attend to "the development of 'affective' skills such as empathy, cooperation, leadership, interpersonal understanding, and self-understanding" (p. 36). For many students, a significant portion of this self-understanding is religious or spiritual, as indicated by survey data from UCLA's Spirituality Project, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), and recent Gallup polls (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006). This is particularly true for students with deep faith commitments (Catron, 2008).

Many faculty, aware of such research, and committed to helping students develop as whole people, still cringe at the thought of what some religiously committed students may bring into their academic work. Imagine this situation, for example: In reading a stack of student papers, you notice that a few students have used the sacred text(s) of their religion to support the perspective they're taking. Most of those do so in what would appear to be relatively unreflective ways—as if finding a verse that supports their view makes their argument unassailable. While religious beliefs are often the impetus for much ethical thinking and behavior, this rhetorical move may be getting in the way of these students' learning. Additionally, it can be difficult for the teacher or for the students' classmates to suggest revisions to such a paper—much less to carry on a productive conversation about the topic under consideration—when a student relies on the authorities of her own religion. To disagree with the student's conclusions, or even to suggest ways in which the position might be supported more effectively, may be seen by the student as an attack on her faith. Wanting to avoid such a dilemma, some faculty may declare particular topics and/or particular resources off limits for student writing or for class discussion.

We contend that this approach—which, in effect, seeks to declare the classroom or the student's academic work a "religion-free" zone—can be counterproductive and shortsighted. Religious and spiritual concerns *do* shape the thinking and behavior of many people in today's world. People of faith *do* see their sacred texts as sources of encouragement, exhortation, and even authority. To prepare to interact productively with others on campus and beyond, we all need to learn to listen and to speak about such matters.

Jacobson and Jacobson (2008) note that students with deep faith commitments may need help learning how to "translate religious speech into rational discourse" so that their perspectives can become part of the conversation that takes place in the academy (p. 230). Students need to "learn to ground their truth claims in bodies of knowledge that may be shared across belief systems" (Montesano & Roen, 2005, p. 85). And we need to "help students find the language that will allow them to bring religious values into public discourse without crippling the dialogue that a democracy depends upon" (Hansen, 2005, p. 33). This means that those students who cite sacred texts as support need us to begin by listening to *what* they are saying. In so doing, we show that we're not necessarily trying to attack what they believe. Instead, we're trying to increase the likelihood that they'll succeed in making themselves heard—trying, in other words, to suggest that they might adapt their *manner of expression* even if

the *substance* of their expression remains the same. This means, among other things, helping students practice important academic skills such as: using sources that one's audience will see as credible rather than relying on sources that are only meaningful to one's particular group, using one's language to help bridge rather than divide, knowing when to use (or not to use) religious language in expressing oneself.

Even when students can find no other way to express an idea than through the "language of religion itself," the use of such language can provide a valuable learning experience, both for the person seeking to express herself and for those listening: "The ability to hear and understand religious language 'in the raw' is a valuable skill in our religiously pluralistic world" (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2008, p. 230).

Education for Civic Engagement

Preparing students for responsible participation in a religiously pluralistic world is perhaps the strongest reason to make space in the classroom for reading, writing, talk, and reflection about religion and spirituality. Chickering (2006) asserts that:

> Issues of religious diversity and spiritual orientations have moved front and center in public forums and political decision-making. Increasing our sophistication about these issues and framing these debates at the level of complexity they require are critical if we are to sustain a civil, pluralistic democracy. (p. 1)

The scholars contributing to the Wingspread Declaration on Religion and Public Life (2005) concur. In preparing students to participate in the increasing pluralism of the United States, colleges and universities need to help students become citizens with the "capacity to understand religious differences, as well as the ability and willingness to engage across differences of belief for the sake of the common good" (p. 1).

It is certainly not a novel idea to argue that building and sustaining healthy communities requires active youth participation. As Cornel West (2004) maintains in *Democracy Matters*:

> It is imperative that young people--of all classes and colors--see that the older generation in the academy cares about them, that we take them seriously, and that we want to hear what they have to say. We must be relentless in our efforts to connect with youth culture in order to impart hard-won wisdom about life's difficult journey--and keep our fragile democratic experiment alive. (p. 200)

Putnam's (2000) practical suggestions at the end of *Bowling Alone* also address this issue, arguing that revitalization of civic life in America first and foremost requires that we encourage American youth to be more engaged than their parents were. He argues that the education system should play a major role in this process, but it needs to make issues of civic engagement more relevant to students' lives: "Improved civics education in school should be part of our strategy," not, "how a bill becomes a law," but, 'How can I participate effectively in the public life of my community?" (Putnum, 2000, p. 405).

We cannot equip students for effective civic engagement without exploring the role of religion in public life. The reality of life in the twenty-first century is that religious participation is on the rise rather than the decline (Taylor, 2007) and religious differences are often connected to religious violence and terrorism around the globe. Engaging youth culture and encouraging young adults toward active public life must include educating them for peaceful and constructive participation amidst religious diversity. Putnam and Campbell (2010) concur. In *American Grace*, Putnam and

Campbell (2010) focus specifically on religion's role in civic revitalization, concluding that Americans are able to allow religious diversity and devotion to coexist when they create a "web of interlocking personal relationships among people of many different faiths" (p. 55).

Rather than creating such an interlocking web, some people react to religious pluralism by seeking neutrality. They hope that avoiding religious conversations will avert religious conflict. But this position is both unrealistic and undesirable. In the words of Patel (2007), "The question of the faith line cannot be answered by drawing a line between the religious and nonreligious. Pluralism--even religious pluralism--is everybody's business" (p. 182). Seeking neutrality does not allow students to come to a more reflective understanding of their own faith tradition, nor does it allow for students from different traditions to build mutual understanding.

Arguably, neutrality can also be a dangerous position. Sweeping differences under the rug, rather than addressing them openly, can lead to frustration and alienation. This concerns Simone Chambers (2002) because "powerlessness makes people susceptible to solutions that, at the very least, offer the satisfaction of venting one's anger and frustration onto a clearly identified villain" (p. 104). Failing to give voice to a position can lead groups to "advocate hate, organize around xenophobia, and generally contribute to an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion between social actors" (p. 105). From this perspective, it is the alienation of religious voices, not religion itself, which can lead to violence and hate. For Chambers, the solution to this problem in society at large is to "both empower and engage citizens across group boundaries" (p. 105).

This is consistent with Putnam and Campbell's (2010) research suggesting that Americans with healthy bridging relationships are much more likely to move beyond mere religious tolerance to a stronger position that affirms that "[religious] diversity is good for the country" (p. 550). As educators, we can play a crucial role in helping to cultivate a culture of peace by engaging and empowering students in the classroom. We do so when we help our students learn to listen charitably, to speak about issues that deeply matter to them, and to engage in discourse that "expresses mutual respect and understanding and facilitates a process that builds solidarity" (Puett, 2005, p. 265-66).

Fostering Dialogue through Trust

A major thread in Putnam's (2000) argument in *Bowling Alone* is that trust and trustworthiness play an essential role in creating and sustaining communal bonds. As he explains, "People who trust others are all-round good citizens, and those more engaged in community life are both more trusting and more trustworthy" (p. 136). Within this discussion, Putnam draws an important distinction between "thin trust" and "thick trust." Thick trust is found in deep, long-lasting relationships with others we know directly. This form of intimate trust is a necessary component of personal relationships that helps keep us connected and committed through the ups and downs of life. Thin trust, on the other hand, is a social glue that enables us to trust the "generalized other," the person we just met or barely know. This sort of trust sustains "generalized reciprocity," the idea that "I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor" (p. 134).

Generalized reciprocity is essential to social life, providing the foundation for healthy business, political, civic, religious, and educational relationships. According to Putnam's research, there is a strong correlation between the decline of thin trust in the

American psyche and the decline of social capital. This is especially problematic, because we need to build and maintain relationships with a diverse group of people in order to constructively navigate life in the contemporary world.

Although religious diversity can often lead to divisive polarization that erodes trust and reciprocity, Putnam and Campbell's (2010) research once again affirms that building healthy relationships across faith lines mitigates against this potential danger. As they explain:

> having a religiously diverse social network leads to a more positive assessment of specific religious groups . . . While both bonding and bridging each serve important purposes, bridging is vital for the smoother functioning of a diverse society. When birds of different feathers flock together, they come to trust one another. (p. 526-27)

Clearly the classroom is an appropriate space for different persons to "flock" together, and as educators it is our responsibility to effectively utilize this space to build bridges.

Patel (2012) notes that "diversity is a fact, [but] pluralism is an achievement" that takes "deliberate and positive engagement of diversity; building strong bonds between people from different backgrounds" (p. 70-1). This means that we need to encourage students to "step off the faith line onto the side of pluralism," says Patel (2007, p. xix). To accomplish this, we must be willing to use the classroom to engage religious difference. What sort of classroom environment is most conducive to this sort of challenging work? A hospitable classroom is one where trust is fostered.

Learning can be scary, particularly when students are encountering ideas and perspectives that challenge their usual ways of seeing. Recognizing this, some faculty avoid controversial topics whenever possible, hoping to keep students from saying or writing something that might offend. While this approach may keep the peace in the classroom, it ultimately doesn't promote peace beyond the classroom. What's needed is a classroom in which trust is fostered—the kind of trust that makes difficult learning possible, the kind of trust that helps to "lubricate the inevitable frictions of social life" (Putnam, 2000, p. 135).

The Trustworthy Teacher

In fostering trust, the teacher needs to show students that she herself is trustworthy—both professionally and personally (Skinner, 2008). Being seen as professionally trustworthy means being credible, says Brookfield (2006). It includes showing oneself to be "able, judicious, and knowledgeable," possessing and showing "academic, pedagogical, and organizational competence" (Skinner, 2008, p. 100). Being seen as personally trustworthy means being authentic, appropriately self-revealing (Brookfield, 2006). It includes being "humane and inviting" in one's teaching, being "sensitive to…relational factors" in learning (Skinner, p. 100). Brookfield and Hess (2008) suggest that personal trustworthiness even includes "demonstrating the ways we [ourselves] are in constant formation, particularly how we are continually forced to question and rethink beliefs and actions with which we have grown comfortable" (p. 12-13).

Being seen as trustworthy goes beyond these professional and personal aspects, however. Skinner (2008) suggests that students need to see the teacher as "spiritually trustworthy" as well. This presents a difficult balancing act, particularly in classrooms where some students' religious convictions run deep and where other students are convinced that religion has little credibility for thinking people. For both types of students, Skinner's notion of spiritual trustworthiness includes demonstrating a willingness to take students'

search for meaning seriously, recognizing the significant role that sacred texts play in many people's lives--their desires to be changed by what they read there. Spiritual trustworthiness could also include our being "willing and eager to engage in the same kind of…reflection" that we ask of our students (p. 105). And it includes allowing students "to reach a range of conclusions," seeking to equip them to "navigate on their own" rather than pushing them to embrace particular perspectives that may be inconsistent with their own religious or spiritual convictions (p. 105-6). "Students who object to particular philosophical positions can be assured that their *agreement* is not the issue," observes Warren (2008). "Their *charitable comprehension* is" (p. 137).

Brookfield (2006) argues that the trustworthy teacher recognizes the significant challenge and deep emotions that can accompany learning, particularly when learning involves "exploring new perspectives and thinking critically" (p. 75). Students whose learning causes them to question their beliefs may fear "cultural suicide," seeing the change in their thinking as an "act of betrayal" to family, peers, themselves, or even God (p. 84). They also may feel anxious when they begin leaving the "solid ground of their old ways of thinking and acting," wondering how to proceed because they feel they suddenly "have nothing that supports them" (p. 93). While such fears won't dissipate readily, "regularly naming and acknowledging the spiritual anxieties that students may be encountering" is one way in which teachers can help allay fear, cultivate trust, and develop a trustworthy community of learners (Skinner, 2008, p. 111). And it isn't just guests who feel anxious, notes Oden (2001): both host and guest "encounter something new, approaching the edge of the unfamiliar and crossing it" (p. 15).

A Classroom of Trust

Because significant learning can have such an unsettling impact on students, it's crucial for the teacher to seek to create a classroom environment that is hospitable—an environment that is "welcoming, affirming, and safe" (Vogel, 1991, p. 108). Such a space needs to allow room for feelings to be addressed, where "each can dare to be vulnerable…[and] can express [even] anger and doubt without being judged" (p. 104; see also Palmer, 1983). Trust is crucial, says Trautvetter (2008), because:

> Everyone, including faculty and students, needs to have the psychological safety to explore, question, confide, and share with others. Thus, it is essential to keep in mind that student exploration and self-critical reflection will occur only if the class environment is considered safe. (p. 40)

Nash and Baskette (2008) concur. They note that "critical, open-minded examination of intellectual material can take hold only if it is undertaken in a mutually cooperative, safe educational environment" (p. 197). This is because it takes courage to step out of the safety of one's existing perspectives—even if one is only doing so temporarily in order to understand new ideas.

Trust is fostered in the classroom when the teacher seeks to cultivate a culture of dialogue and conversation rather than that of argument or debate. While debates can be engaging, pushing students to argue for a position can be counterproductive: Singham (2008) points out that in such learning conditions some members of class will spend time "hiding the weaknesses and exaggerating the strengths of their own position, while at the same time ignoring or minimizing the strengths of other views and emphasizing their flaws" (p. 153). To avoid this, Nash, Bradley, and Chickering (2008) identify three attitudes

in particular that participants need to bring to the conversation and work to develop through their dialogues. Participants should first seek to "open conversational spaces" through practicing what Nash, Bradley, and Chickering (2008) refer to as the "golden rule of moral conversation: listen to others as we would be listened to. We need to question and challenge others as we would be questioned and challenged" (p. 20). In addition, each participant needs to be willing to recognize that she is not the only one in the room with "wisdom and insight into truth" and that contributions from others are "worthwhile in some way." For this reason, each idea needs to be given at least an initial "right to be heard and understood," and each participant works to listen in order to understand—rather than to correct or argue (p. 21-22). Finally, particularly when encountering difficult or controversial topics, participants work together to look for what they might have in common. This might involve trying to "embrace…even the smallest kernel of truth" in perspectives with which one disagrees—and if that's not possible, then at least "make a commitment to try to understand (not agree with)" what is so important about the perspective "of the other for the other" (Nash and Baskette, 2008, p. 195).

In other words, we need to learn to practice respect, in the sense of that word's Latin root: to "look back, again and again, to find value in what one might have initially opposed or dismissed" (Nash and Baskette, 2008, p. 196). Hess and Brookfield (2008) put it this way: "When we show respect for others, we work diligently at seeing them clearly for who they are, at trying to understand as much as we can the ways they have experienced the world, and the development of their own spirituality" (p. 11).

A classroom of trust is marked by respect—for each other, for those who expressed the ideas being considered in class, and for the ideas themselves. Such a climate can be fostered through course design so that there is "ample time for reflection and discussion," room for students to consider "how certain ideas matter" to others and perhaps to them personally (Skinner, 2008, p. 109). Such a climate is also fostered by a teacher who demonstrates interpretive hospitality and encourages students to practice this approach to others' ideas as well. Such hospitality includes approaching others' ideas charitably, taking time to read and listen carefully, seeking to understand as fully as possible, and being open to the inevitable changes that occur when encountering others and seeking to take their ideas seriously. Interpretive hospitality, says Volf (1996), requires a form of "double vision"—an attempt to see both "from here" and "from there" (p. 251). It's natural to see "from here," says Volf. This means seeing "from our own perspective, guided by our own values and interests that are shaped by the overlapping cultures and traditions we inhabit" (p. 251). It involves reading "the beliefs and practices of others through the lenses of our own tradition" (Volf, 1999, p. 1234). This step is essential. Too many people aren't willing to take the time to learn about and listen carefully to the voices of those who don't speak their own religious language.

Dialogue will not accomplish much if we avoid practicing interpretive hospitality by taking time to see "from there," an inversion of perspectives in which "we enter sympathetically into others' efforts to interpret their scripture" (Volf, 2004, p. 43). In addition, we pay "receptive attention to their own story about who they see *themselves* to be" (Volf, 2002, p. 19, emphasis added). Seeing "from there" also includes listening to "how they perceive us as readers of our own scripture" (Volf, 2004, p. 43).

Both teacher and student need to remember that "progress *requires* risk," observes Gregory (2001) Thus, "helping students to take risks required for progress is

an absolutely necessary teaching strategy" (p. 76). Of course, in taking risks, not all efforts will prove successful: "Interim failure" is inevitable (Gregory, 2001, p. 76). Students will avoid taking the risks that are necessary to learn if they do not trust their teacher. A trustworthy teacher, working with students in a classroom of trust, seeks to develop an atmosphere that is "not merely friendly" but is also challenging. It is a classroom in which "the teacher's willingness to call a bad job a bad job is seen by the student as helpful and productive rather than as mean and destructive" (p. 82-3). Such trust, notes Gregory (2001), helps students become "willing to take the risk of real engagement, the risk of failure, and the commitment to practice that constitute the grounds of learning" (p. 83).

An instructor seeking to cultivate trust in her classroom will also pay attention to the ways in which language can function to promote or to inhibit student exploration of new and personally challenging ideas—such as those related to religion. Shady and Larson (2010) note in particular three suggestions along these lines. First, students benefit if they are given "low-risk" opportunities to process their thoughts and feelings orally and in writing. Such opportunities can take the form of small group discussions, anonymous postings to a class electronic discussion forum, and guided journal assignments that receive feedback but are not graded. Second, instructors can seek to cultivate a culture of dialogue and conversation rather than that of argument or debate. Mano Singham (2008) points out that a debate approach encourages participants to spend time "hiding the weaknesses and exaggerating the strengths of their own position, while at the same time ignoring or minimizing the strengths of other views and emphasizing their flaws" (p. 153). Third, craft assignments that will give students practice in learning to find flaws in an idea as well as assignments that will help them consider the possible strengths of a perspective. Peter Elbow (2006), who developed what he calls "the doubting game and the believing game," suggests that we need to help students "scrutinize with the tool of doubt," seeking to be "as skeptical and analytic as possible" (play the "doubting game"), and try to find the hidden virtues" in ideas we disagree with, trying "to be as welcoming as possible" (play the "believing game") (p. 15-16).

Conclusion

We can no longer afford to avoid the issue of religion in the classroom. Not only should we engage students when they raise the issue of spirituality, educating them to hold reflective views that are appropriately connected to academic work, but we should also proactively make space for religion in the classroom. West (2004) states, "There can be democratic dialogue only when one is open to the humanity of individuals and to the interiority of their personalities" (p. 100). In order to live in a world where persons are genuinely open to each other, we must learn to mirror this openness in our academic communities.

Following Putnam and Campbell's (2010) research, students not only need to encounter religious difference, but also need the opportunity to have positive interactions and build relationships with persons who believe differently than they do. Consistently Putnam and Campbell's (2010) analysis demonstrates that the more "bridging" relationships a person has with people of different religious and non-religious beliefs, the more "warmth" that person identifies with those differing traditions (p. 529). Additionally, Putnam and Campbell also identify a "spillover effect" whereby developing a friendship with a person of a different faith not only leads to a higher regard for that particular faith tradition, but also leads

to a more positive perception of other religious and non-religious traditions. Essentially, the more experiences one has with actual people who hold different faith perspectives, the more open to religious diversity one becomes. As Putnam and Campbell (2010) state,

> We have reasonably firm evidence that as people build more religious bridges they become warmer toward people of many different religions, not just those religions represented within their social network . . . . While religious bridging appears to foster more acceptance of all religions that may seem exotic or unusual, there is even greater acceptance when a bridge is built to a member of that specific group. (p. 534)

Citing the work of social psychologists Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp, Putnam and Campbell agree that the " . . . potential for friendship" is a condition that must be present for contact among people of different social groups to reduce prejudice (p. 527-28).

Encouraging students to move beyond mere academic recognition of different religious and non-religious traditions to meaningful interaction with texts and persons from those traditions is not always an easy task. For many students the task seems daunting, or even threatening. At the same time, it is clear that students need to learn how to interact hospitably with persons of different faith traditions in order to constructively navigate the religious pluralism of the contemporary world. Educators can learn to utilize the classroom in a manner conducive to bridge building. This academic project will only be effective, however, if the classroom itself is a space of trust and trustworthiness. Being sensitive about how we, as educators, respond to situations where students use a religious text in a paper, bring up religion in a classroom discussion, and even interact constructively with persons holding different views, can play an important role in fostering trust both within academic settings and beyond. If students develop thick trust, among themselves and their instructors in the classroom, they will be more open to thin trust in the world at large. Learning to have constructive discussions of religion in college will enable more healthy dialogues in the workplace and public sphere.

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