

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

Relationships Across the Divide: An Instigator of Transformation

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Volume 5 (2010)

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol5>

In a recent conversation Jewish educator Naomi Towvim spoke of “a surprising lack of information about Jews and Judaism” among Catholics. She should know; she has worked, with her Roman Catholic colleague Celia Sirois, to educate Catholic religious educators (from both parishes and Catholic schools) in the Boston, Massachusetts area on the topic of Christian-Jewish understanding.¹ While she admits there was no lack of good will among Catholics, after many years she still finds a “lack of knowledge” and “no sense of consequence” among Catholics about the Jewishness of Jesus and his earliest followers. Yet the lack of understanding is not all on one side. Current research indicates that Jews are also unlikely to understand Christianity well, particularly the positive change in relationship between the Catholic Church and Judaism. Anat Barber found that “most of the contemporary Jewish population, save for Jewish leaders, has no formal education or up-to-date information regarding the Catholic Church.”² These two accounts each reflect, in their own way, a lack of educational initiatives directly connecting Catholics and Jews on the congregational level, resulting in a lack of understanding of or concern for the other as religious persons.

Those in religious leadership with long careers in interfaith dialogue attest to the importance of their relationships with

their interlocutors for building commitment to and concern for the other. The ever-deepening relationships build in each: a commitment to understanding; to reconciliation, when necessary; and to continued dialogue even in the face of difficulties. Particularly they attest to how those relationships have helped them understand their own faith differently while developing a deep commitment to the other.³

Much has been accomplished on formal levels to improve relations among Christians and Jews over the past fifty years.⁴ However, the same advances have not been made on the local level, between members of Christian and Jewish congregations. The challenge is to find an educational model that best serves adult congregants so as to lead to a transformed relationship among Christian and Jewish congregants and congregations. I argue that building relationships among individual Christians and Jews should be central to an educational agenda for members of local congregations. Interfaith relationships serve as a motivator of care and understanding for congregants, just as they do for leaders in dialogue. Direct engagement between congregants results in greater self-awareness and commitment to improve relations between the two religious communities.

¹ This private conversation took place following a lecture and panel discussion on January 27, 2010 at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. The initiative is *New Directions*, co-sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League and the Archdiocese of Boston. It is designed for Catholic religious educators to educate around their own Christian faith with greater awareness of its Jewish roots. More recently programs were developed for Jewish educators on the shared roots of Christianity and modern Judaism. <http://regions.adl.org/new-england/programs/new-directions.html> accessed March 5, 2010.

² Anat Barber, “Jewish Community Institutions and Education in Interfaith Efforts,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2009). <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol4/iss1/17/> (accessed January 12, 2009).

³ Examples of such stories include those found in Mary C. Boys and Sara S. Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue : Learning in the Presence of the Other* (Woodstock, Vt.: SkyLight Paths Pub, 2006) and Judith A. Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), and from stories shared by contributors to John C. Merkle and Walter J. Harrelson, *Faith Transformed : Christian Encounters with Jews and Judaism* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003).

⁴ As reflected in International Council of Christians and Jews, “A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* Vol. 4, no. 1 (2009). <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol4/iss1/7/> (Accessed March 5, 2010).

The presence of the religious other as peers in the educational process on the congregational level provides what educational theorist Jack Mezirow calls the "disorienting dilemma" necessary for transformation among participants. This article substantiates that claim with illustrations from a qualitative study of the relationships that developed across the religious divide during an educational program with Catholics and Jews. The program brought together adult members of a Roman Catholic parish and a Conservative Jewish synagogue, both set in a small city in the northeastern United States. It was based on a model of interreligious learning developed by Mary Boys and Sara Lee, adapted for the congregational setting.

Interreligious Learning Models

There are currently multiple models of interreligious learning; not all are appropriate for congregations. Those suggested for European contexts are primarily designed for secondary school settings, where educational curriculum about religions is mandated by some school systems. These models frequently depend upon guest lecturers,⁵ or case studies,⁶ but do not presume nor depend upon the students themselves being religious adherents. Their primary agenda is raising religious literacy and tolerance for religious difference within society.

Other models designed for North American settings are primarily suggested for higher education, including seminary

settings.⁷ These too depend upon readings and lectures, case studies, and other forms of immersion in the religious world view of another. While some theorists, particularly Judith Berling, expect that students themselves are religious adherents, there is no expectation (particularly in the seminary setting) that students would be able to engage across religious differences; rather that opportunity would be the exception.

On the other hand, religious education theorists Mary C. Boys and Sara S. Lee propose a model that is well suited for congregational use. They argue for "study in the presence of the other as fundamental to interreligious learning."⁸ In their model "presence" is embodied in the physical presence of the religious other as well as the "key texts, practices, and beliefs of the other's tradition."⁹ Their own work has been with Christians and Jews, and their writing reflects settings in which members from two religious traditions interact in the educational process as peers. This model is the most suitable for use on the congregational level because it is predicated on the participants themselves being religious practitioners, not simply students of religion. Such is the case at the congregational level, even if the level of practice or religious observance may vary among members.

Their work is informed by educational theorists such as Stephen Brookfield, Jane Vella, Lee Shulman, and Nicholas Burbules. Each contributes to Boys' and Lee's thinking about the purpose, design, and execution of interreligious learning. They understand interreligious learning as transformational of

⁵ Lars Naeslund, "The Young and the Other: Students' Voices about Encounters with Faith," *Religious Education* Vol. 104, no. 2 (2009), 166.

⁶ Bert Roebben, "Interreligious Learning," *Religious Education* Vol. 104, no. 1 (2009), 103, and Anna Halsall and Bert Roebben, "Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue through Education," *Religious Education* Vol. 101, no. 4 (2006), 443.

⁷ Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, Michael J. Stoltzfus and James A. Reffel, "Cultivating an Appreciation for Diverse Religious Worldviews through Cooperative Learning in Undergraduate Classrooms," *Religious Education* Vol. 104, no. 5 (2009), 539.

⁸ Boys and Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue*, 95.

⁹ Boys and Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue*, 96.

the participants' self-understanding in light of "changed perspectives of the other."¹⁰ Transformation is accomplished through an "encounter with *the tradition* [of the other] as *embodied in the other*" rather than "learning *about* the other in the abstract."¹¹ As a result, it "affects many aspects of an individual's religious self-understanding and identity."¹² While Boys and Lee have developed this model with religious leadership as participants, I show that it can be adapted for use at the congregational level with similar transformative affect.

Transformation and Critical Reflection in Interreligious Learning: Jack Mezirow

Though not a theorist Boys and Lee name, Jack Mezirow, a leader in transformational learning theory, offers a helpful framework for understanding what is behind the transformation process. Mezirow defines knowing as ordered into *meaning perspectives* and *meaning schemes*. *Meaning perspectives* are those "codes that govern activities of perceiving, comprehending, and remembering."¹³ They are the filters through which we see (or fail to see) the world around us. Within a *meaning perspective* are *meaning schemes*. Mezirow identifies schemes as "specific knowledge, beliefs, value

judgments, or feelings involved in making an interpretation."¹⁴ *Schemes* fill in the framework created by the *meaning perspective*; they are the information that fit in the forms. Likewise, information that does not easily fit within a given *meaning perspective* or contradicts it is not seen, ignored as irrelevant, or altered to fit the *perspective*. Thus *meaning perspectives* make seeing possible, by giving sense to what is seen, but also limit seeing by ignoring or skewing what does not easily fit. Accordingly, a *meaning perspective* necessarily requires revision as one encounters more complexity and variety in the world and the existing *perspective* is found insufficient to make sense of that complexity. Mezirow defines transformative education as a process of assisting learners in finding the inadequacies of current *meaning perspectives* and altering them to become those that "are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable (open), and integrative of experience."¹⁵ Mezirow is hesitant to suggest that *meaning perspectives* are either right or wrong; rather, for him, a "more adequate" or "satisfying" *meaning perspective* is one that recognizes and makes better sense of the complexity of reality, thus generating "beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action."¹⁶

Critical reflection is the primary tool for revising *meaning perspectives*. It is essential for unmasking presumptions and inadequacies in search of more adequate beliefs and actions. Educational theorist Stephen Brookfield sharpens Mezirow's understanding of the nature of critical reflection, asserting that it necessarily involves examination of power and hegemony. He asserts that an ideological critique is crucial to critical reflection

¹⁰ Boys and Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue*, 66. A full account of their thinking can be found in chapters four and five.

¹¹ Boys and Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue*, 67. Emphasis in original.

¹² They frequently make the point that the transformation is asymmetrical. For the Christians the task is largely theological; reconsidering the centrality of Jesus in light of the continued validity of the Jewish covenant with God. For Jews the task centers on reconsidering an identity that is not rooted in victimhood. Boys and Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue*, 96.

¹³ Jack Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning" in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*, ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 4.

¹⁴ Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning," 5.

¹⁵ Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 111.

¹⁶ Jack Mezirow, "Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory," in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 8.

as “the process by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices.”¹⁷ Brookfield’s insistence on an ideological critique is helpful in the interreligious learning setting in that it points to the fact that religion is never merely a private endeavor but one steeped in public and political consequence that shape the private and public expressions of religious belief and practice.

When overlaying Mezirow’s framework onto interreligious learning we can see that a religious worldview can be seen as the *meaning perspective*. A religious worldview determines how one perceives or interprets elements of the religious tradition: biblical texts, community structure and purpose, religious practices, history, belief statements, and concepts of God’s saving action. These perceptions or interpretations contribute to the larger construct of religious worldview, and they can be understood as *meaning schemes*. For example, if my Christian worldview is dependent on a devaluing of Judaism, then my understanding of scripture and tradition will reflect that presumption. Furthermore, I will either not recognize, or not make sense of pronouncements, even those from Church leadership, that are attempting to offer a different relationship with Judaism. If I do hear them, I will likely distort them into something more recognizable and immediately acceptable, or only grant them minimal significance such that my overall perspective is not challenged.

Both Catholic and Jewish religious leadership who have been engaging in dialogue and study articulate new understandings and practices that have contributed to more appropriate self-understandings and relationships between the two traditions. We can say that these leaders have gone through a transformation of their *perspectives* and are

¹⁷ Stephen Brookfield, “Transformative Learning as Ideology Critique,” in *Learning as Transformation*, 128.

developing new *schemes* for their religious communities. As valuable as their efforts are they have largely gone unnoticed by Jewish and Catholic congregants because some deeper *meaning perspective* remains unchanged at the congregational level. Although supplied with renewed *meaning schemes*, initiation of the critical reflection process and eventual transformation of the *meaning perspective* needs some trigger in order for those new *schemes* to fit. As Brookfield writes, “because of their pervasiveness and persuasiveness, ideologies are hard to penetrate.”¹⁸

The Necessity of a “Disorienting Dilemma”

If I am embedded in a particular *meaning perspective* it is unlikely that the piecemeal introduction of transformed *meaning schemes* will have sufficient impact to get my attention.¹⁹ Rather, Mezirow argues that transformation is initiated by some “disorienting dilemma” that tips the scales and helps the learners see the inadequacy of their current *meaning perspective*. It is in response to this disorientation that the learner begins “self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame” followed by “a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumption.” Once disorientation has begun to show the inadequacy of a *perspective*, the critical reflection process can

¹⁸ Stephen Brookfield, “Transformative Learning as Ideology Critique,” 130.

¹⁹ Likewise, Catholic theologian Terrence Tilley makes a similar theological argument. Believers have to experience some sense of disequilibrium with old ideas and practices prior to investigating new, more satisfactory practices or interpretations. Tilley demonstrates the nature of religious beliefs and their corollary practices as contextually grounded; as context change, meanings can slip, so practice must alter if meaning is to remain intact. Yet he makes clear that “Any proposal for reformation must be accepted by the practitioners who put it into practice.” If the reform does not make sense, if it seems unnecessary, it will not be taken on. Terrence W. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000), 80.

begin in earnest.²⁰ A potentially valuable “disorienting dilemma”—offering both reason and desire for change—is the proximity of the religious other in the learning setting, as partners in the learning. The presence of the other as a learning partner not only assists in the development of renewed *schemes*, but also provides an added incentive for reconsideration of religious *perspectives* than if this same material were studied in isolation. That incentive is what I call the *affective link*, whereby one comes to care for the other and so comes to care about what affects the life of the other. Affective links can develop without a deep familiarity with the other. Rather, they can grow from a sense of commonality, respect, enjoyment, or appreciation, and so inspire a wish for deeper understanding. In Boys’ and Lee’s model the affective links are able to develop while the participants are also learning about one another’s religious tradition; thus, understanding and concern grow simultaneously.

Boys and Lee attest to the importance of the presence of the religious other in their learning settings, but their primary exemplar (The Catholic-Jewish Colloquium) involved religious leaders and educators and took place over a three year period.²¹ That example reflects a considerable investment in time and formal education among members and so would appear out of the reach of most congregants and congregations. I argue that the model is a highly valuable one for the congregational level and that the presence of the other serves as the primary cause of “disorientation” for adults on that level

²⁰According to Mezirow, disorienting dilemmas can include such things as loss of employment, death of an important person, social crisis, and a significant encounter with otherness. Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 168.

²¹ The Catholic-Jewish Colloquium is reported on extensively in Mary C. Boys and Sara S. Lee, “The Catholic-Jewish Colloquium : An Experiment in Interreligious Learning,” *Religious Education* Vol. 91, no. 4 (Fall, 1996), 421; and Boys and Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue*, 220.

because of the capacity therein for participants to form an affective link with other learners.

Adult members of religious congregations differ from the leaders of those congregations (especially Catholic and Jewish congregations) in a few important ways:

1. Formal religious education within their own tradition frequently concluded in their adolescence;
2. They usually do not hold significant responsibility for religious leadership to the congregation or to a wider religious body;²² and
3. Their primary professional commitments are most often outside the congregation.

These are each significant in their own way. Relative to a lack of formal religious education—particularly graduate or professional level—congregants seldom have a deep enough understanding of their religious tradition to articulate that tradition in meaningful ways; this will be illustrated below. Furthermore, lack of familiarity with scriptural texts and other source material would make it difficult to recognize contradictions in their interpretations (e.g., valuing *Nostra Aetate*²³ as a Vatican Council document, but continuing to read the New Testament as abrogating the covenant with Israel). As regards their

²² By leadership I mean religious leadership (e.g., ministerial, worship, or educational) not organizational (e.g., synagogue boards, finance boards, or parish counsels).

²³ *The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, proclaimed in 1965 at the Second Vatican Council. Among the major teachings of *Nostra Aetate* relative to Jews are: all Jews “without distinction” were not to be blamed for the death of Jesus; that God “does not repent” of the gifts given the people Israel; that “the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God;” that the church “decries...displays of Anti-Semitism;” and invites respectful dialogue. Austin Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 1975), 1062.

responsibility to the congregation and professional commitments outside the congregation, these adults would take part in an interreligious learning experience voluntarily—perhaps inspired by relationships with friends or even family. They would not participate as a requirement of essential professional development, with an intention of enhancing the congregation's life. Likewise, they would not feel compelled to continue if their primary professional commitment interfered. However, as regards critical reflection, the first point is likely the most important. Lack of deep familiarity with one's own tradition—its history, its doctrinal and theological exposition, the rational and history behind practices, its texts and interpretations—make it difficult, and so unlikely, for one to engage in critical reflection on that tradition except where it touches on aspects of daily life. Stated in another way, it would be unlikely for most adult congregants to see where and how one's religious tradition interferes on the dignity, freedom, and religious sensibilities of another. Finally, a sense of politeness, or at least a fear of engaging others in religious discussions frequently stymies meaningful critical conversation among most adults before it begins.²⁴

However, those barriers (politeness, lack of deep familiarity with one's own tradition, lack of awareness of disparagement) can be overcome, such that adult congregants can move to critical reflection if sufficient attention is paid to creating a learning environment whereby affective relationships across the religious divide can develop. Developing such relationships serves as the beginning of the "disorienting dilemma" that spurs critical reflection and potential transformation. Even in a relatively short period of time, relationships can develop

²⁴ Anthony Lising Antonio, "When does Race Matter in College Friendships?: Exploring Men's Diverse and Homogeneous Friendship Groups," *Review of Higher Education* Vol. 27, no. 4 (2004), 553; Theresa O'Keefe, "Learning to Talk: Conversation across Religious Difference," *Religious Education* Vol. 104, no. 2 (2009), 197.

sufficiently so that disorientation can begin to affect change. Brookfield writes that the resulting transformation is "a shift in the tectonic plates of one's assumptive clusters."²⁵ While an apt image, it may give the impression of transformative learning as an "all-at-once" event, but true movement takes time, allowing both tremors and fault line shifts to occur as the landscape settles into a new position. Following Mezirow's schema, the *perspective* may shift, but the accompanying *schemes* will take time to be renegotiated. Regardless, something must initiate the shifting, and I argue that it is the affective link across the religious divide that is an effective incentive for change.

Adapting for the Congregational Level

Educating for this kind of encounter takes time and attention. It does not "just happen," because participants will revert to expected modes of behavior by avoiding difficult topics or keeping discussions at a surface level. Yet productive conversation can happen if attention is given to the opportunity to develop relationships among participants and care is given to maintain respectful conversation amid challenging topics.²⁶ The centerpiece of Boy's and Lee's interreligious learning model is significant time spent in conversation among the participants, in both small and large groups, with conversation directed towards personal understanding and practice of religion. My understanding of such conversation is premised around Nicholas Burbules' conception of conversation as an "inclusive-divergent" form of dialogue. This form of speech is designed to invite diverse views with the aim of mutual understanding, but not necessarily agreement or problem-solving.²⁷

²⁵ Stephen Brookfield, "Transformative Learning as Ideology Critique," 139.

²⁶ This is one of the initial findings of this study, as reported in O'Keefe, "Learning to Talk: Conversation across Religious Difference," 197.

²⁷ Burbules' discussion of four dialogic speech forms—debate, instruction, inquiry, and conversation—is found in chapter nine. Nicholas C. Burbules,

Boys and Lee have acknowledged that this model, when used with religious leadership, has created and heightened a sense of commitment to the other and deepened participants' religious self-identification.²⁸ They attest to the considerable planning that has to go into the interreligious learning processes, including questions and conversation among participants such that relationships are able to form among participants and with the tradition of the other. Fundamental elements of the model that Boys and Lee have executed (both those they name explicitly and those observable in their accounts) include the following:²⁹

- An educator from each tradition co-leads the experience and work as partners in developing each component.
- An equal number of participants from each tradition are sought.
- Participants are relative peers to one another.

Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

²⁸ They have worked predominantly with religious educators. The most striking accounts of participants' learning are found in the writing of the participants of their Catholic-Jewish Colloquium of 1992: Joanne Chafe, "Colloquium Participants Speak," *Religious Education* Vol. 91, no. 4 (Fall, 1996), 502; Julie A. Collins, "Can I Not do to You as this Potter has done? Interreligious Learning and the Transformation of Religious Identity," *Religious Education* Vol. 91, no. 4 (Fall, 1996), 468; Cynthia Reich, "On Pluralism and Religious Education: How Jesus Changed the Life of a Jewish Educator," *Religious Education* Vol. 91, no. 4 (Fall, 1996), 555.; Barbara Veale Smith, "Encountering the Other and Deepening in Faith," *Religious Education* Vol. 91, no. 4 (Fall, 1996), 562.; Addie Lorraine Walker, "Dialogue as a Strategy for Transformative Education," *Religious Education* Vol. 91, no. 4 (Fall, 1996), 589.

²⁹ Mary C. Boys and Sara S. Lee, "Introduction: Religious Traditions in Conversation," *Religious Education* Vol. 91, no. 4 (Fall, 1996), 416; Mary C. Boys and Sara S. Lee, *Christians & Jews in Dialogue*.

- Sessions take place in a location that is mutually comfortable.
- All participants have equal access to source materials, whether written, video or live presentation.
- Participants learn about each other's tradition in the presence of one another.
- Co-leaders select and present material (e.g., texts, lectures) that serve as the centerpiece of participant reflection and discussion.
- Conversation among participants is central to the learning process.
- Discussion is directed (but not necessarily facilitated) in small and large groups, with questions that build from the presented material and are directed towards personal understanding and practice.
- While encouraging a critical engagement with the other, a presumption of affection for what the other holds dear is central.

At the congregational level certain adaptations should be made such that the three distinctions of congregation members (in formal religious education within their own tradition; in responsibility for religious leadership; and in primary professional commitments outside the congregation) are accommodated. I developed these adaptations with my colleague, Rabbi Lynn Liberman for use in 2004 with a group of 16, the membership of which was divided equally among Conservative Jews and Roman Catholics congregants.³⁰ They are as follows:

³⁰ This experience is the basis of the study, data from which is offered in the following section.

1. Facilitate the model between two congregations within a single geographic area. This allows the opportunity to build on any prior relationships among participants that exist in the community (e.g., neighbors, business associates, school-mates). More importantly, this creates the potential for building long-term relations among participants and between the two congregations, including the re-occurrence of interreligious learning.

2. The second adaptation is in the time commitment. Enough time must be allowed for people to get to know one another and learn together, but too much of a commitment would be prohibitive of those with other significant commitments in their lives. Local custom may dictate what is acceptable for adult education experiences. However, the illustrations offered below indicate that relationships developed sufficiently within two hour, weekly meetings over the course of eight weeks, comprising a total of sixteen contact hours among participants.

3. A third adaptation is the use of scholarly, yet accessible course material. In our own course we used the video-based series *Walking God's Paths*, released from the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College.³¹ The video presentations provided a framework upon which eight two-hour sessions were built. *Walking God's Paths* attended to the following topics:

- a. The modern history of Christian-Jewish relations, including the "teaching of contempt" of Jews by Christians, and the changed teachings of the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council.
- b. An overview of late Second Temple Judaism and the eventual parting of the ways between Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.
- c. A focus on biblical texts as sources of commonality and division.
- d. A review of the springtime festivals of Passover and Easter, with an understanding of what they each say about God's saving action.
- e. A consideration of metaphors that illustrate the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.
- f. Looking to the future of dialogue and collaborative efforts in and for the world.

The *Walking God's Paths* video segments were supplemented by reading assignments and in-class presentations determined and presented by Rabbi Liberman and me. The supplemental material was chosen with the learners in mind—intelligent adults, but not theologically trained—offering background information that made the video elements even more accessible.³² For example, participants read chapters one and two of Marc Saperstein's book *Moments of Crisis in Jewish-Christian Relations* in preparation for an early session on the

³¹ National Council of Synagogues, et al., *Walking God's Paths Christians and Jews in Candid Conversation* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Pub, 2003). At that time this resource was newly available, and support material around the program was limited to the "Focusing Questions" and "Discussion Questions" that were to accompany the video presentations. As that time there were no recommendations for outside resources or suggestions on session facilitation.

³² All members had at least completed high school, most had completed an undergraduate degree, and some had completed graduate/professional degrees. The topics discussed reflect five of the eight main issues that need to be explored between Catholics and Jews, as recommended by Joseph Sievers and Lawrence H. Schiffman, "Learning about Ourselves while Learning about each Other: Proposals for Jewish and Catholic Education," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* Vol. 4, no. 1 (2009), 3, <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol4/iss1/15/> (accessed January 12, 2010).

current status of Catholic and Jewish relations.³³ Throughout, attention was given to balancing helpful source material from both religious traditions.

4. Another important adaptation is the facilitation of the small groups so that the conversation is kept on topic and does not veer away from difficult material. In our own case, the facilitators were gifted in directing conversation among adults and had some experience in interreligious dialogue. Those personal experiences in education and dialogue gave them an awareness of the dynamics of group interaction as well as an anticipation of the challenges particular to the Catholic-Jewish encounter.

5. Boys and Lee have used neutral spaces for the experiences they have directed. Their reason was that there may be discomfort for participants, particularly the Jews, if surrounded by the religious imagery of the other. I recommend, rather, use of the congregations' spaces, and for each congregation to alternate as host. This allows use of the space as a teaching tool, including tours of the worship space. It also creates the opportunity to shift the power dynamic of guest and host. It provides the opportunity to learn what it means to be a good host. For us that was demonstrated in the Catholic hosts' learning of and adhering to the dietary restrictions of some Jewish participants. Furthermore, hosting in the congregation's home allows for impromptu extra-curricular learning inspired by the activities and structure of the site. Again, this happened when the Catholic participants were invited to try *hamentashen*, which was being baked at the synagogue in anticipation of Purim.

6. Regardless of how full each session may seem, it is important to have a break mid-way through each session. It is included so that class members have a built-in opportunity for

informal conversation. Sometimes those conversations are on the session's topic, but frequently they are not. As valuable as teaching time is in this program (as in many programs) the opportunity for informal conversations is essential to the overall learning and development of relationships.

7. Following Boys' and Lee's example, small group discussion sometimes happened in either faith-alike (all-Jewish or all-Christian) or faith-different groups. Among adults living in the same community, pre-existing relationships are common occurrences in adult learning settings. Consideration should be given to the potential effect these can have on the learning process. In our case the two faith-alike groups were not altered, but Rabbi Liberman and I were able to determine the faith-different groupings. We did so with the intent of separating those with long established relationships (spouses, friends, and family) so that long-established patterns of relating did not inhibit new relationships.

8. As a final consideration, it is important to name the goals for educating at this level. The educational goals for religious leadership should be ultimately directed towards new theological inquiry, promotion of educational efforts, or furthering formal diplomatic relations. While theological investigation of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism should not be excluded, more basic goals would be central to an initial experience as named here. Those goals might include, but not be restricted to, a desire for participants to recognize the other religious tradition as valid and vital; to appreciate the historical relationship and religious connections between the two traditions, and the positive change underway; to appreciate the shared yet distinct natures of biblical texts and interpretation; and to recognize instances of devaluing of the other tradition

³³ Marc Saperstein, *Moments of Crisis in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

and its adherents.³⁴ While these may seem very basic, accomplishing these goals opens up opportunity for further study and deeper relations between the communities. They would also be a great improvement over the status quo and would create greater incentive for religious and diplomatic leaders to advance the relationship between the two communities further.

Boys' and Lee's model for interreligious learning, centered around learning in the presence of the other, creates new modes of relating around religious belief and practice for participants. The use of productive conversation at the center of the model encourages participants to speak for themselves, such that the tradition is embodied in the people present. Misunderstanding, ignorance, and prejudice are challenged by that presence. Likewise, complexity and nuance found within a tradition are more visible in the various participants. Boys' and Lee's model is rich with possibilities. The adaptations to the model for the congregational level enhance those possibilities in that they consider the differences of time, education, and purpose appropriate for congregants. They also take advantage of the resources available in congregations (e.g., the existence of prior relationships, the use of worship space as an educational tool). Furthermore, the adaptations enhance the possibility of building affective links among participants such that they develop and maintain over time new relationships—and ways of relating—as individuals and as congregations.

What follows are illustrations drawn from an experience of Boys' and Lee's interreligious learning model adapted for congregational use. The illustrations substantiate how learning accompanied by and set within relationships across the religious divide prompted "disorienting dilemmas" for participants

³⁴ These goals are in line with the educational goals outlined in International Council of Christians and Jews, "A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians."

such that they began to question and reconsider their pre-existing religious *meaning perspective*.

Moments of Disorientation: Illustrations from the Congregational Level

Over the course of the eight week program mentioned above I conducted a qualitative study. In it, I was investigating the development of the conversational dynamic among the participants. The first finding, reported on in a previously published article, is that conversation across religious difference is a learned activity that is supported by constructs in the learning setting.³⁵ As Nicholas Burbules argues, it takes concerted effort for educators to help learners carry over the skills of conversation that they use in more personal settings to more public educational settings.³⁶ I would suggest further that when the subject of conversation is the known religious difference between interlocutors, even greater care needs to be taken in the teaching setting to help people move from polite avoidance to meaningful engagement. The earlier article names the factors (including pedagogical choices) that contribute to participants' capacity to engage in meaningful conversation. They are:

- That conversations benefit from ground rules and facilitation;
- Those disciplines and parameters allow for freedom of inquiry;
- That productive conversation includes respectful disagreement, freedom to question, and thinking aloud;

³⁵ O'Keefe, "Learning to Talk: Conversation across Religious Difference," 197-213. The particulars of the study were reported on in this previously published article and are not repeated here.

³⁶ Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 42-43.

- That there remain limitations to conversation, including the use of defense mechanisms and attempts to avoid controversy.

Attention to the process, environment, and structure of conversation contributes to an atmosphere of trust, safety, and purpose that allow productive conversation to get underway.

The remainder of this article offers analysis of how the conversation—and the conversational relationship—provided “disorienting dilemmas” in which the Roman Catholics and Conservative Jewish participants recognized and became dissatisfied with their previously held *perspectives* concerning their own and the other’s religious tradition. In some instances, a move towards critical reflection is demonstrated, thus initiating a process of potential transformation. The relationships across the religious divide developed in the interreligious educational model produced four instances of disorientation. The relationships assisted participants in:

1. Seeing the relationship between Christians and Jews differently;
2. Seeing the other more clearly and recognizing presumptions;
3. Recognizing differences in perspective;
4. Heightening ownership of and responsibility for understanding one’s tradition;
5. Opening to the value and validity of the religious other.

The instances involved both Catholic and Jewish participants.

1. Seeing the relationship between Christians and Jews differently

One of the first and most important learnings for both Catholics and Jews in the course was that the present and historic relationship between the two religious traditions is different—and more complex—than they had expected. As the following stories illustrate, it was the study of source material in the presence of the other—a sometimes uncomfortable experience—that helped participants see things differently and attribute value to that difference.

For Jim, learning about the history of violence perpetrated by Christians against Jews caused him to appreciate that history as part of the current relationship between Christians and Jews. Jim, a 35-year-old Catholic, is a self-professed lover of history and he does a lot of reading in history as well as in Church teachings. Yet the readings assigned in preparation for the second class were quite a surprise for him. They were the two chapters of Marc Saperstein’s *Moments of Crisis in Jewish-Christian Relations* which recount the difficult, often bloody history between the two communities from the first to the sixteenth centuries, CE.³⁷ Jim admitted to finding the history distressing and something he would rather not consider. He admitted that he was not surprised by the history, but “I guess I’m guilty of avoiding things like that because I’m always very afraid it’s going to tarnish my image of the Church.” He even admitted that if Saperstein’s material had come to him from a different source (e.g., not from a teacher and a class he already validated and respected), he would have either ignored it or gone looking for something that would have refuted it.

Jim attested that the presence of his Jewish classmates made a difference in his reading the assignment:

³⁷ Saperstein, *Moments of Crisis in Jewish-Christian Relations*.

I would read a line or a paragraph and I would put it down and go (intake of breath), "Oh, man what are they going to think about [us]?" (Laughter) I thought I was going to go into that next class and they could have either been pointing at me, or saying, "What did you do?" I thought it was going to be a pretty rowdy class after that.

When the session did not turn out that way, Jim attributed it to the fact that this history was long known to the Jewish members. In that session he had the chance to hear further how that history had impacted their lives as a community and as individuals.

After that, Jim admitted to going back and forth between wanting to leave the history buried and bringing it out for all to see; but he ultimately acknowledged:

I don't think I'll particularly look at a Jewish person quite the same....Now any time I think that I look at a Jewish person that [history] will always enter my head.

For Jim studying this disturbing material in the presence of Jews, whom he was coming to know and respect and who were reading the same material, made it difficult for him to ignore it. Their own perspective on it gave the history texture and impact. Jim admits knowing all this has changed the way he sees Jews. What makes this instance a "disorienting dilemma" is that it caused Jim to see the Church as "tarnished," thus creating a possibility for critical reflection on the Church's relationship vis-à-vis Jews.

Elaine also came to see the current relationship between the two communities differently. As a Jewish woman in her mid-60s, she was familiar with the history of violence but not with its theological foundation. In the same session

referenced in Jim's story, the video spoke about the Vatican Council and its impact on Catholic life with particular attention given to the document *Nostra Aetate*. In class, participants read sections of the document and it was presented against the context of the early Christian community's development of anti-Jewish and later super-sessionist teaching.³⁸ Elaine admitted to finding the theological foundations for Christian animosity very disturbing and had not realized that there was "so much anti-Judaism in scripture and prayer." It was in light of learning about Christian anti-Judaism that she found the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* so revolutionary; at the end of the course she named the turn-around as her greatest learning.

While Elaine has many close friendships with Catholics and had heard about the Second Vatican Council in the past, she had no idea of its impact on Catholics and their relationship with Judaism. It was the conversation with the Catholic participants, who talked of "how they were taught" growing up (prior to the Second Vatican Council) and who demonstrated their present desire for reconciliation, that made the changes both more dramatic and believable for Elaine. She was really impressed by the great desire of the Catholic participants to understand Jews and Judaism. She had "a sense of the Catholics trying harder than the Jews for understanding. They were very earnest." Through the opportunity to converse with Catholics whose lives and religious understanding was directly

³⁸ The terms "anti-Jewish" and "super-sessionist" have many nuanced interpretations. For the sake of the class presentation the most basic was employed. Anti-Judaism is a Christian interpretation of scripture and of liturgy that privileges Christians' relationship with God through Jesus Christ over Jewish interpretation and practice, while disparaging all things Jewish. Super-sessionism is the Christian understanding that the covenant of God with Israel has been superseded by that with Jesus Christ. Thus the Jewish covenant is null and void. Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? : Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 10-11.

affected by *Nostra Aetate*, Elaine came to appreciate the significance of the change for the Catholic Church and these individual Catholics. For Elaine the disorientation came in hearing the stories of Catholics who were thankful for the Church's changed teaching and who were sincere in their desire for change in relationship with Judaism that both gave her hope about the future. That disorientation also led her to some critique of her Jewish counterparts' hesitation.

For both Elaine and Jim, the presence of the other contextualized what they were learning about the other, giving it breadth, texture, and value. The information was not simply about "those people" but about other participants whose voices and stories contributed to the lessons in very personal ways. The stories heard in the group assisted Elaine to value the changes and challenges for Catholics that she had not seen prior to this encounter. For Jim, the learning caused him to see and take seriously what Jews saw in his church—something he would have ignored were it not for their presence. Both experienced "disorientation" by which they came to see the relationship between Catholics and Jews to be different than they had previously understood; their disorientation was caused in large part through the presence of the other in the learning process.

2. Meeting the other and recognizing presumptions

The prior examples with Jim and Elaine involve material that was an explicit part of the curriculum. Yet very often the learning identified by the participants was not explicitly planned, but came about simply because people were together. The learning was usually drawn from impressions that the two groups made on one another and often revolved around differences and similarities between the two groups. I say two groups because although one or two people may have been particularly good exemplars of the behavior observed, very

often the impression was attributed to the group of Jews or Catholics at large. Note that none of these topics were directly attended to in the curriculum of *Walking God's Paths*. They were drawn from the encounters that the participants had with one another. It should also be noted that a few of these revelations came to people who have had long-standing prior relationships with members of the other tradition, but this was the first time they were seeing these things. The combination of learning and relating with one another prompted them to see differently. In each case the learner came to see that his or her new understanding indicated a prior presumption about the other. It is through relating in the learning setting that those prior presumptions are brought to light.

Frances (a 77-year-old Catholic) had known Nathan (a 78-year-old Jew) from years ago through a business related encounter that did not go particularly well. However, now they were in the same small group and Frances had several opportunities to hear Nathan speak and to know him differently. As a result of this opportunity she admitted, "I think we as Catholics figure no one else prays. We have the emphasis on prayer.... I was impressed with Nathan and his talk about envisioning what he needed to do with his life...and prayer was a big part of that. And particularly of people you don't expect it of." She laughed at herself for assuming that only Catholics had relationships with God that involved a practice of prayer: "That's dumb, isn't it?"

Gladys (a 68-year-old Jew) was surprised to find that Catholics were so open-minded. In the class, she found that the Catholics were very interested in sharing and learning. "Maybe their views are different, but they were still trying to understand....I felt like it was a new beginning....You could feel very comfortable." Through her prior experience she had come to appreciate diverse opinions among her Jewish co-religionists but had believed Catholics to walk in lock-step with one

another, and to be closed to diverse opinions. She found this experience with her Catholic classmates to be quite different from her expectation.

Caroline and Kelly (two 48-year-old Catholics) were both impressed by the intense study adult Jews brought to their religious practice. Caroline in particular was fascinated with their grasp of the Hebrew language:

I was really interested in how even, not just the Rabbi, the other members of the group would say things, and would say, "In Hebrew we call it such and such. And it's not exactly this." And they would use that right in their conversation trying to explain things to us. And I thought [of] the richness of the Hebrew instead of this really hard thing to have to learn another language. And I remember having classmates [in school] who had to go to Hebrew school and I never realized how rich it was.

Even though both women have taken on leadership roles in their parish, including assisting in religious education, both Kelly and Caroline found their knowledge of Catholicism inferior to their Jewish participants' knowledge of Judaism. Independently they also bemoaned the lack of an atmosphere of adult learning in their church while it was very apparent to them in the synagogue.

Caroline offered another example of surprise at her prior perspective. At the end of the course she admitted that she held the view, mostly unconsciously, that the Jewish faith had not changed since the time of Jesus, and through the course that view was challenged:

I don't think I thought a lot about it, but that's exactly what I thought. I thought it was the same religion. So over the course of those eight weeks, that's what struck

me the most was what [Judaism] is, these many facets. These many facets that I was unaware of.

The class—particularly the conversations with her Jewish classmates—helped her recognize her own failure to see Judaism as more than a precursor to Christianity. Her pre-understanding of Judaism as a static tradition would likely have implicitly affected her interaction with her Jewish sister-in-law and her teaching in the parish's religious education program. However the conversation with her classmates about their religious practice showed her a tradition that has continued to grow and give life.

On the other hand, both Howard and Elaine (72 and 66 year-old Jews) were impressed with the faith of the Catholics and the strength of their relationship with God. As Howard said, "I think I have a greater understanding of the passion of the Catholic members...of their real involvement." Elaine found that the Catholics were "more spiritual and more people of faith." As for Judaism, she said, "it's more a 'practical' religion; following the rules to some extent." Neither thought a relationship with, or even a belief in, God was necessary for Jewish identity and practice, but they both picked that up as central and valuable for the Catholics they met and came to admire it in them.

The setting of learning with and relating to one another caused participants to see one another differently and become disoriented such that they began to see their prior perspectives. In some of these instances (Frances, Gladys, and Caroline) one can hear indications of "feelings of guilt or shame" that Mezirow mentions come with seeing something anew.³⁹ The process of reevaluating what they have known begins with disruption of previously held ideas.

³⁹ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 168.

3. Recognizing different perspectives

Hand-in-hand with a new appreciation of the other can come a new awareness of oneself.⁴⁰ Differences come to light as just that, differences. The encounter with the other brings to light the recognition that religious ideas or practices—once assumed to be held universally—are in fact unique to one's own tradition. A first step in critiquing hegemony is recognizing that there are diverse perspectives.

A good example of this happening comes from Max and Jim who worked as a *hevruta* briefly studying a passage from the book of the prophet *Isaiah*.⁴¹ Although the passage was familiar to both of them prior to this meeting, when they looked at it together they appreciated immediately that they were each approaching it differently. Jim “could hear [Jesus] saying this” about himself—“He made my mouth like a sharpened blade”—while Max understood God to be speaking directly to him in the passage. It was no surprise to either Max or Jim that the two traditions shared this biblical text. However, both were surprised to realize that they interpreted the text differently because of their religious tradition. Granted, in the short time they had together neither Max nor Jim got a deep understanding of what the other understood in the text, nor how it was interpreted fully in the other's tradition. What they did get was an appreciation simply that it was interpreted differently by the other.

⁴⁰ Developmental psychologist Judith Jordan argues that the recognition of distinctiveness brings a person to a greater sense of “clarity” of who they are themselves. Judith V. Jordan, *Women's Growth in Diversity: More Writings from the Stone Center* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 342.

⁴¹ *Hevruta* pairs are a traditional and dynamic form of study of texts—biblical and Talmudic—in Jewish education. We used *hevruta* pairs twice over the course of the eight weeks.

In a later interview, Jim spoke of the *hevruta* work with Max as heightening his own sense of difference:

It was very interesting. (With laughter.) Seeing both sides of it. Seeing the [*Isaiah*] reading from a different angle. I guess I just never really thought of it that way.... I immediately think Christ. And they look at it differently....

I think this whole class has really changed me in the effect that I'm not going to look at things in the same way anymore. I want to see it the way a Jewish person would see it, the way an atheist would see it, and the way maybe a Baptist would see it. I'm going to look at it from a lot of different fronts now. And I just feel that I think basically so that it would open me up a little more to the way someone else would look at it. I think I was always reading anything...one-sided in a way, and that really did affect me. It really did change me in that sense. And that's a good thing. It was really good hearing someone else, seeing it from a different angle.

Reading the *Isaiah* text with Max gave Jim a chance to see that his reading was an *interpretation*, and not just how the text was, and that it could be read differently from “the context that [Max is] looking.” The consideration had never occurred to him, as he admitted having read things “one-sided” up to this point, but here he was disoriented from his own perspective enough to see and grant initial validity to another reading. This opens the possibility of critical reflection on the interpretation of the biblical text.

4. Heightening ownership of and responsibility for understanding tradition

This pair of illustrations concern changes in participants' sense of connection to their own tradition. They are not necessarily critical of their religious tradition. Rather, the transformation comes in a new sense of responsibility for understanding and owning their tradition. Let me point out that a sense of responsibility for and understanding of one's tradition would be normal among religious leadership, but among congregant members this is not necessarily the case.

An example of this arose when the Jews were asked to speak to their understanding of being "chosen" by God, a concept held by Conservative Judaism. The Jewish members, best exhibited here in Elaine's comments, consistently tried to both explain and downplay its importance in their understanding of Judaism.

Elaine: Well first of all it's always been a concept that has kind of irritated me, because, um, I don't really think that my religion, one of its main objects is to set me above other people. I just have trouble with that.

Betty (the small group facilitator; Catholic): So chosenness does mean something to each of you—correct me if I'm not interpreting correctly. That it gives you a sense of responsibility, commitment...

Howard: Obligation.

Elaine: I would say that's the way I interpret this [Biblical] passage, but I actually am using that as kind of an excuse. I really don't care for this particular statement. It's there and I don't want to really say I disagree, but the only way I can interpret it not that I'm really chosen

but that I have some responsibility. Of all the Jewish things I would say this is kind of far down on my list of things that I consider important.

There was an effort among the Jews to disassociate from the concept, while at the same time trying to explain how they interpret it. Towards the end of the discussion Nathan finally speaks to why they might wish to disassociate themselves from it by explaining:

This chosenness theory has been one of the causes of anti-Semitism. Because non-Jews say, "You're pretty fancy; you think you're better than everyone else."....We don't feel that chosenness is an important part of our practice of Judaism.

His comments brought to light a compelling reason for Jews to put aside this concept. While the Catholic members seemed to appreciate that point, they still wanted to understand chosenness and the role it plays for the Jews. This was one of the liveliest and most intense conversations of the whole eight weeks as Catholics and Jews engaged in the intense effort to understand and be understood.

After the class, Elaine recognized that the very fact that they were asked to speak on chosenness and that it inspired such lively discussion in the group means that it is important *outside* the Jewish community. The Catholics were very inquisitive but not threatening throughout the process. The process of being questioned about it in this setting brought Elaine to admit that her interpretation was "kind of an excuse" for distancing herself from the concept. This is not to suggest that there is a single way for Jews to understand the concept of chosenness; but that it is not a concept that can be ignored simply because it is uncomfortable. As much as she has wished to disassociate from the concept, the presence of the Catholics and their

questions caused her to give it renewed consideration as an element of Jewish identity.

As participants begin to articulate their religious beliefs with people who do not share the same tradition, they come to see that there are distinct differences between traditions and perspectives. The uniqueness of a perspective becomes clearer in the exchange; language and concepts are not shared. Thus articulation is more challenging in that it necessitates finding language that can be understood outside the community, but it also requires understanding the concepts deeply enough to accomplish that communication.

A good example of the difficulty of articulation is seen when Frances, a 77-year old Catholic, tried to explain what the resurrection means to her. She was challenged by the effort of making her views understood by the Jewish members and came to see her limited understanding of this long-held belief. Frances talked about it this way:

It's just to try to formulate what you're trying to say [about the resurrection], and even though I had thought about it ahead of time, but when it actually comes to doing it. Of course, as Ida and I were both saying, you do things in your faith for years and years and years, and you never think about why. So to have somebody ask you "Why?" and specific questions as to why...(trailing off).

Interviewer: I remember you saying to people a few times: "Well you just don't think about these things."

Frances: *Well you don't, you really don't.* You just lead your life, and mostly I think you think about the Gospel more than you do specifics...like the resurrection. I mean that floored me, really. Because I don't think I

ever think about what the resurrection is, even though you accept it. Then to have to explain it...Then Nathan's saying, "Well you know they wrote these things 30 or 40 years later." And I thought, "Well that's true." And he goes, "What's your answer to that?" And you go, "Blah, blub, blub" (Laughter). Because you accept them, and have for years, they are part of your heritage, part of your belief system. But to actually explain it...You can discuss it with someone who actually has the same belief, but even that is a little difficult. Because, I don't know, you just don't. Like I said, you just don't think about it. Consequently it's hard to articulate.

For Frances the exchange with Nathan caused her to see how little she understood this concept, even though it was central to the Christian tradition and her professed faith. A prior, unquestioning assent to this teaching was disoriented by the challenge of articulating it for her Jewish classmates. She began to see how little she understands it.

Reflecting on these two instances, I do not suggest that either the Jewish members or the Catholics have to—or should be able to—provide an explanation that is satisfactory to those outside their tradition about elements unique to their traditions. Nor do I suggest that upon examination these elements are something that members of a tradition wish to hold closely—as was the case in the chosenness discussion. What I am saying is that traditions are perceived by those outside them (well or poorly) as having unique characteristics. Those same characteristics may go unnoticed or un-discussed within the tradition simply because their meaning is assumed by its members. The presence of the religious other in this learning setting, and the requirement that participants speak for themselves, has the capacity to disorient someone from a prior place of comfort and move him or her to recognize a need for greater ownership of or responsibility for their tradition. It can happen, as it did here

in both the resurrection and the choseness discussions, that members have to become aware of and confront characteristics unique to their tradition simply because the other asks.

Max expressed it this way in a journal entry:

This whole experience has made me appreciate my own traditions. I spoke with pride about my beliefs and practices. Being in a position to articulate thoughts and beliefs provided me with opportunity to grapple with and appreciate my own traditions.

A few weeks after completion of the course, Max, reflecting back on the value the course held for him, said, "You gave me back my tradition." I asked him what he meant by that. He explained that by having him share his own understandings of his Jewish practice with Catholics, rather than having the Rabbi do all the teaching, he realized that Judaism was his and not simply the possession of rabbis.

5. Opening to the value and validity of the religious other

The final story illustrates how the affective link that develops between participants has the potential to cause a "disorienting dilemma" for a religiously embedded participant, such that he becomes dissatisfied with his religious perspective that excluded the value of Jewish belief and practice and begins examining his perspective in a more inclusive manner.⁴²

⁴² I use the terms "exclusive" and "inclusive" as understood by Diana Eck. An exclusive perspective does not allow for the validity of religious traditions outside one's own. An inclusive perspective allows for the religious validity of other traditions in as much as they conform to elements of one's own tradition. Eck argues that *Nostra Aetate* should be read as advocating an inclusive position. Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 168-185.

At 35, Jim, the youngest Catholic, was the most devotional in his practice and serious in his study. In other settings he was accustomed to having to "defend the faith" among his contemporaries who were not religious. He said early in the process that he did not expect this course to have any impact on how he saw his Catholic faith.

Changes began early for Jim as he got to know the Jewish members of the class; this would be his first instance of a religiously-based interaction with practicing Jews. His most important connection was with Max, a few years older, and one of the more observant among the Jewish members. Jim and Max were in the same small group, and were paired as a *hevruta*.⁴³ Early on in the course, after their first evening in *hevruta*, Jim felt particularly frustrated in his inability to be articulate. He wanted to apologize to Max for his inability to speak clearly. Jim tells this story:

We were leaving the synagogue. I said [to Max], "I was trying to get some stuff out. It's there but I can't get it out sometimes." And [Max] goes, "It's all right. It's all in here." putting his hand on his [own] chest, and "That's what's important." And that really made me feel good. I've said that to people too; I just never had anybody say it to me and it was really nice.

Similarly, in another group discussion, Jim shared his thoughts on the value of faith in his life, and again was feeling inarticulate. He was amazed that it was Max who finished his thoughts by expressing Max's own, which were so similar to Jim's. Jim was surprised to find someone who was like himself

⁴³ Rabbi Liberman and I tried to create *hevruta* pairs between people who appeared peers in the hopes the similarities would assist them to quickly bond in conversation. In this case Max and Jim's similarities in religious practice, age, and gender were all contributing factors.

in depth of religious practice and care, and at the same time have that person be Jewish.

Jim came to see how much he had changed by the end of the eight weeks when he saw how he had moved away from positions he had previously shared with his Catholic friends outside of the course. In our final interview he recounts phone conversations he had had over prior weeks with Catholic friends, in which they greeted his enthusiasm about the course with silence. He interpreted their reactions to mean, "Why are you even doing this? Why would you even consider doing something...Why don't you have discussions with other Catholics?" He admits that he would not have been much different if he had not had this experience. Those phone conversations caused Jim to compare where he was at the end with where he had been prior to these classes. Like his friends, he probably would have thought talking to Jews a "dead end" pursuit, for Jews' lack of belief in Jesus. In that last interview he admits:

To be honest, I didn't think I really could be overly close to someone who was Jewish, in a...how do I say this? I mean, in a friendship way it's fine, and everything, but I didn't think I could have the type of depth with a Jewish person than I could have with a fellow Catholic. And I believe I could do that now.

Jim can see where he was, when he compares himself with his Catholic friends. He admitted further that at the time he did not know how to reply to this friend, but he also said because of this class experience:

I would be much more apt, *much, much more apt* to [speak up] in the right setting. If I was hanging out with some friends, in a bar in Boston or something, if something came up about the Jewish faith, I would be much more apt to put my foot down and say, "You don't know.

You don't really know the depth of their faith and how they look at things."

For Jim it was seeing the "faith" of his Jewish counterparts, particularly Max, that was disorienting and opened for him the value of Judaism.⁴⁴ These were people for whom he previously admitted "feeling sorry" because they did not believe in Jesus.

A few times in conversations with me over the eight weeks he raised a concern about the fate of his Jewish classmates after death. What would happen when they met Jesus for judgment? He admitted thinking about it frequently and being quite concerned. Finally, in the last interview when asked what he *imagined* might happen, he responded:

I just wonder what [Jesus is] gonna say when they die and they meet [him]. I'm hoping he's just gonna, you know... I hope he's gonna sit there and say, "Your faith...You were so into your faith, which was wonderful, glad to have you aboard. Come on in!"

He was still concerned about their lack of belief in Jesus and wished he could just "give them his faith." Yet at the same time, he had come to see the depth and sincerity of their religious life, he had come to value it, and *believed that Jesus would too*. He did not drop the need for Jesus as a result of encountering Jewish belief, but he tried to make room for them in his own belief. As such he moves from an exclusive perspective to one that is more inclusive and able to recognize value in the Jewish tradition.

⁴⁴ I use "faith" in quotation marks, because it was not a word that the Jews often used for their own belief or practice. It is the word Jim consistently used for them.

It is unlikely that sixteen hours spent studying in the company of members from another tradition will make congregants fully adept at rethinking their religious perspectives. However, that time commitment can give reason to start by creating the space to develop affective links that help participants think differently about the other and themselves. When Jim started this program he was unable to attribute value to much outside the Catholic tradition. However, at the beginning of the process, Jim did possess the capacity of heart to care beyond the borders of his own community when given the opportunity in this learning environment to meet and get to know the other. As a result, over the course of the program, he made connections with Jews that he never had before and began to appreciate the validity and vitality of their own "faith." Note that he does not restrict this consideration to Max but attests to how he would defend Jews in general, saying "You don't really know the depth of their faith and how they look at things." This is a major shift for Jim made possible by the chance to learn in another's presence and talk about another's religious belief and practice directly with the other person.

Conclusion

While religious relations among Catholics and Jews has advanced significantly over the past half century, especially along official and academic avenues, those advances have not in large part impacted the religious perspective of adult adherents at the congregational level. Yet the diplomatic and academic avenues need the support and encouragement of local congregants if greater advances are to be made in the relations between the Catholic Church and Jewish communities. Congregations and their members are a source of incentive, but congregations are also the places where peace-building, learning, and cooperation happen on a local level.

The interreligious learning model proposed by Mary Boys and Sara Lee—in which study in the presence of the other is central—serves as a workable and effective model for adult education at the congregational level. Attention to accessible scholarship in selected material is important. However, of equal importance is the intentionality of relationship building among participants. Paying attention to the structure and processes among the participants, creating space and opportunity for safe and productive interaction enhance the potential of participants creating affective links with one another. They come to care about one another as they come to know one another. As Jack Mezirow argues, the transformative learning process is initiated by a "disorienting dilemma." The disorientation brings learners to rethink their meaning perspectives. Relationships whereby participants come to know each other while learning about their religious traditions have the potential of providing the "disorienting dilemmas" such that they begin to see beyond their prior religious perspectives.

The study illustrations provide valuable indicators about the centrality of forming relationships across the religious divide for transformative learning among adults at the congregational level. As a result of the disorientation caused by those relationships, participants showed significant instances of:

1. Seeing the relationship between Christians and Jews differently;
2. Meeting the other and recognizing presumptions;
3. Recognizing different perspectives;
4. Heightening ownership of and responsibility for understanding tradition;
5. Opening to the value and validity of the religious other.

The amount of time spent together, the direct conversation among participants, the group structure, and the formal and

the informal engagement created the space and atmosphere in which participants felt at ease enough to know and be known. The resulting changes created the potential for new relationship for these congregants and their congregations—and so renewed possibilities between these two great traditions.