

INTRODUCTION

If the first decade of the 21st century has taught us nothing else, it most assuredly has taught us that some of the greatest challenges facing our society are inseparably linked to the increasing importance of religion in the world today and the decreasing numbers of Jews and Christians who are finding spiritual homes in either the synagogue or the church. This has come about because, in large measure, neither tradition has found constructive and creative ways of engaging well-educated and deeply committed congregants who make up the “center” of their respective communities.

Both Christian and Jewish clergy report that the single greatest factor accounting for this “loss of the center” is the failure of both church and synagogue to develop viable theological responses to the problems that inevitably arise in a religiously diverse society. Our religious institutions have done little to teach the majority of Americans how to understand, interpret, or respond to the often conflicting demands of the multiple religious traditions that have over the years found a place within our borders. This failure has not only created serious fissures within American society, it has also hampered efforts to fashion appropriate responses to conflicts around the globe. Moreover, this failure has left Jews and Christians who make up the “center” vulnerable to two polarizing forces—the pull toward fundamentalism and isolation from the religious “other,” and the push toward the secular consumer culture and the abandonment of religion altogether. On the one hand, if people are not exposed sufficiently to the complexity of religion at the local, national, and international levels, they become isolated within religious enclaves, unable to understand or appreciate other religious points of view. On the other hand, when churches and synagogues do not or cannot articulate their core values, beliefs, and practices in terms that are accessible to the society at large, they are dismissed as irrelevant and incapable of forging a center that holds.

Also at issue is whether Jews and Christians can bring the wisdom of their traditions into the larger political conversation. Do Jews and Christians have anything distinctive to contribute in the public arena? All too often public policy debates are muddled by religious allegiances, as the rancorous arguments over abortion graphically illustrate. Yet our religious traditions have important insights to offer as we wrestle with new ethical quandaries. When we enter the domain of bioethics and contend with technological breakthroughs like stem cell research and genetic engineering, when we confront our obligations as stewards of God’s creation and contemplate a variety of environmental guidelines and policies, when we are called upon to assess the distribution of limited resources and weigh our duties to those who are desperately in need, we are dealing with profound religious questions. Our responses to these questions will have a significant impact on the larger polity. But how will the judgments of one tradition be brought to bear on the views of other traditions? Can religious communities temper their absolutist tendencies and communicate their particular insights in ways that are morally persuasive to the general public? There is no doubt that the interplay of religion and politics will have an enormous bearing on our communities, our nation, and the world. We dare not continue to ignore this critical topic, yet most of us lack the requisite knowledge to address it properly.

Interfaith Dialogue: The Case for Particularity

Many educational ventures that promote interfaith understanding begin with a quest for common ground, and that is where they stop. Participants are guided to the discovery that they are not as different as they once imagined. They may worship in very different sanctuaries, but they share deep ethical commitments. They may follow different liturgical calendars, but they lay claim to scriptures that overlap. They may perform different life-cycle rituals, but they hold common hopes and fears. Educational resources that revolve around our commonalities enable us to look beyond our idiosyncrasies and help us to gain a more universal perspective. The recognition of our common humanity begets an affirmation that our destinies are interwoven.

Interfaith dialogue that limits itself to the search for common ground can carry with it an unintended consequence: It often leads to the conclusion that religious differences are incidental, that our disparate spiritual traditions are essentially interchangeable. Attention to world events ought to disabuse us of such notions. They should teach us that religious differences are very real and of great moment, that ideological hostilities have in fact created fault lines that separate “us” from “them,” and that these rifts will become increasingly wider and more dangerous if we fail to develop and nurture a more expansive sense not of sameness, but of global kinship. In our polarized and fragmented world, educational programs that forge connections across religious and ethnic divides are desperately needed.

While the pursuit of common ground remains a noble educational goal, the resources assembled in these volumes will lead those who use them into less familiar terrain. Our intention is to launch an adventure that will enable Jews and Christians to understand and come to cherish those dimensions of their respective traditions that distinguish them from one another. Rather than confine this exploration to the more familiar areas of agreement, we are committed to study that will reveal the distances between the two communities and shine a light on their irreconcilable differences. This educational project seeks to disclose the particularity of each tradition and to celebrate those dimensions of each community that, by reason of their very distinctiveness, cannot be subsumed or assimilated by the other.

Why place the accent on our particularities? Because we believe that the greatest challenges depend on an ability to live with and learn from our diversity. Many of us are familiar with the quip, “I love humanity. It’s my next-door neighbor I can’t stand.” It is easy enough to affirm an abstraction, but the most intractable difficulties emerge when we are confronted by flesh-and-blood human beings who differ from us in looks, behavior, or beliefs.

To create a civic space where justice and compassion can flourish requires more than good intentions and lofty ideals, more than common ground. Sooner or later we find ourselves standing on ground upon which our ancestors in the faith sowed discord and disagreements that have borne bitter fruit over thousands of years. Jews and Christians may both dream of a time when our swords are beaten into plowshares, but even our noblest aspirations are

cultivated on theological ground where clashing values and bitter dissent have deep roots. Many of us come from families, schools, and congregations that do not manage conflicts well, yet we scramble to rise above the tensions and transcend our differences. But many of the most essential insights are hard won, depending as they do on a resolve to confront our ignorance, tolerate confusion and uncertainty, risk embarrassment, and encounter divergent points of view.

Our religious communities have not yet learned how to argue passionately without sacrificing civility. We have developed the habit of avoidance and go to great lengths to make certain that we do not step on anyone's toes. We proceed cautiously lest we accidentally cause offense. And when a problem erupts or an argument drives a wedge between us, we are at a loss. We all know of conflicts that generate enduring resentments and cause irreparable damage. Yet there are also conflicts that can prove enormously creative and greatly expand our horizons.

The rabbinic sages make a distinction between arguments for the sake of ego and arguments for the sake of heaven. Our quest is to develop the capacity to differentiate the one from the other and, in the process, embolden Jews and Christians to take some daring risks. The educational experience at the Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies has convinced us that our diversity can prove a blessing. The vitality of both our religious traditions and our democracy depends on our willingness to challenge our assumptions and learn from our differences. We are confident that participants in the educational venture we present here will find that their differences are not an obstacle to overcome but a source of fresh learning. We believe that there is a beauty and a wisdom that can only emerge as Jews and Christians learn how to engage in arguments for the sake of heaven. Out of this inquiry will emanate a keen awareness of the particular gifts that we each have to offer one another and the world.

The Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies
956 Dulaney Valley Road
Baltimore, Maryland 21204
(410) 494-7161

Curriculum writers:

Christopher M. Leighton, Executive Director and Protestant Scholar
Rosann M. Catalano, Associate Director and Roman Catholic Scholar
Adam Gregerman, Jewish Scholar
Ilyse Kramer, Educator and Project Director
Janis L. Koch, Associate Scholar and Project Editor