



# connect

A Newsletter for High School Religion Teachers, Campus Ministers, and Principals  
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## featuring

### Religious Diversity in Catholic Schools

Jonathan Yü-Phelps



Pluralism of religions is a reality in the United States. We see it in the newspaper, and we encounter it in our own classrooms. Through television, the Internet, and the changing religious landscape of our own country, our students encounter Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. As religious educators, we need to address diversity issues regardless of how religiously diverse our particular school or community is. In fact, we are in a unique position to nurture our students' attitudes toward the world's religions as well. Our courses give students a framework for understanding not only the Catholic faith

but other faiths as well. Social studies and English courses help form our student's perceptions of all the world's religions, Islam and Judaism in particular. As our students continue to encounter other religions in high school or in college, their perspectives will be formed in part by what we are teaching them now, intentionally or not.

#### Answering Objections

Have you ever heard this question: In a Catholic high school, why should time be taken away from the study of our own tradition and given to the study of other religions? We might answer with some questions of our own: Shouldn't we take time for the spiritual questions that our young people have? Shouldn't we provide an opportunity and an environment for students to feel comfortable posing challenging questions to adults who have the training to respond to them? In the context of a Bible or church history class, or in discussions about world news, I have found it useful to bring in the point of view, as I understand it, of Jews and Muslims. We cannot fully understand Christianity apart from the two other major Abrahamic faiths. But understanding these faiths is only a first step. After an initial question about Islam or Judaism, students will often ask for clarification about a corresponding belief or practice in the Christian faith.

Explorations into other religions are essential to laying down a basis for lifelong respect for difference. Too often our attitude toward other faiths, as Americans and as Catholics, has reflected ignorance and contempt. Even today, we are not free from that kind of bias. Nevertheless, the recent Jewish-

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## in touch

Jonathan Yü-Phelps, of Newton Country Day School in Massachusetts, hits the nail on the head when he explains how confronting religious pluralism in our classrooms can raise difficult issues for religious educators: "We may wish to be open and tolerant of other life-giving worldviews. We may especially wish to be welcoming to non-Christians in our schools and in our religion classrooms. But we may not know how to do that while witnessing to our faith. We may worry about asking our students to examine their belief in Jesus Christ while acknowledging that a majority of the world gets along quite well without him."

In this issue's feature, Jonathan offers insights gleaned from seven years of teaching world religions classes. Christine Navarro and I, both of us former teachers and currently editors of teaching manuals,

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## Religious Diversity

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Catholic movement toward better understanding of Judaism in Catholic education seems to be a Spirit-led and hope-filled sign that we are changing our perspectives on other religions. The *Shoa*, or Holocaust, has changed our understanding of ourselves forever. We now know with certainty that to be faithful to the Gospel, the church must witness against oppression and persecution. Violence between sides that are drawn up mostly along religious lines continues to dominate world news, and in the United States, the home of so many emigrants from these conflicts, we have an opportunity to be peacemakers and to train the peacemakers of tomorrow.

There is a clear mandate for this work from Pope Paul VI in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes, 1965)*: "Every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion . . . is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent" (no. 29; emphasis added). Our social justice classes respond to Paul VI's call, but we cannot relegate the demand for justice to just one course. Part of our work is examining what we are already teaching about other religions not only in religion classes, but in the social studies and other departments. We have a responsibility to ensure that we are not passing on prejudices and biased information that is in direct contradiction to the spirit of Catholic social teaching.

### Seizing Opportunities

The presence in our schools of students whose families practice Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, primal religions, Sikhism, or other religions is a great

resource. Those students can be learners and teachers about their own traditions. When a classmate presents information about his or her own culture or religion, students not only are attentive but their questions reveal a genuine curiosity for the subject as well as sensitivity toward the classmate. Offering this opportunity is a first step in teaching our students to dialogue with one another.

In my world religions class, a Thai Buddhist student spoke about the rituals his family performed at his grandmother's death. His sharing had an authority that I, as a Roman Catholic, could never have, even though I am the teacher. At the same time, because this student is a friend and peer, the rest of the class found the practices of Thai Buddhism less strange and foreign than they otherwise might have. This created an opportunity for the class that no Roman Catholic religion teacher, no video, no Web site could ever provide.

*Listening* is a crucial skill in encountering difference, and it's a skill that Jesus demonstrates in the Gospels. He listened to the Syro-Phoenician woman, and she changed his mind. He listened to the Roman centurion and found someone with great faith. He shared water with the Samaritan woman, and together they overcame the religious and cultural barriers between them. Jesus' example in these stories reminds us that too often we categorize people and expect them to fit into our categories. Listening means letting go of what we already think and paying attention to what we experience in a current encounter.

We can provide opportunities for dialogue among our own students of diverse religious backgrounds, or we can invite representatives (ministers, priests, rabbis, imams, and so

## in touch

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and have put together a lesson that can be found in the "from the classroom" section of this issue. It may help your students to establish a foothold between the rocky shoreline of intolerance and the lukewarm ocean of indifference. Catholic educators are in a unique position to offer students a touchstone: the doctrine of inherent human dignity. Genuine respect for "the other" provides the grounding for a struggle to understand teachings such as this one from the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes Divinitus, 1965)*: "Although . . . God can lead those who . . . are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church, nevertheless, still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize" (no. 7).

Blessings on your work as you continue to celebrate the diversity you find in your classroom and in your community.

Live, Jesus, in our hearts, forever!

*Lorraine*

Lorraine Kilmartin  
Editor in Chief



on) of the religious traditions present in our student body. We can introduce our students to organizations that foster dialogue among youth. In the Boston area, the Anti-Defamation League operates a Muslim-Jewish-Christian interfaith youth group. Students who participated in this program say they loved meeting new people and learning about the religions of others. This is just a beginning. We can encourage students to organize

## Religious Diversity

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days of awareness, to bring in speakers, to celebrate holidays, and to explore other ways to build bridges. We cannot see the world that our students will live in; we cannot imagine how the religious communities of tomorrow will be formed by interreligious dialogue today. But if we encourage our students to participate in it with a spirit of understanding and peace-making, we earn the right to hope that the world may improve.

### Working with Religious Pluralism in the School . . . and Beyond

Learning who is in our school is important. At Newton Country Day School, knowing that our student body includes young people from the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Buddhist traditions gives the whole school a context for announcing and learning about Diwali, Ramadan, and other holidays. Additionally, we invite students from those traditions to offer a song or reflection as part of our school-wide worship. We identify ideals such as peace, justice, or forgiveness that are shared by other religions, and find ways to bring another faith's perspective on them into our school. For example, bulletin boards in our school have had quotes from the sacred scriptures of the world's major faith traditions.

Like our Catholic Confirmation candidates, students from other traditions take part in ceremonies that have significance in their life. Jewish students may have recently been Bat/Bar Mitzvahed, Muslims may be planning to go on the Hajj, Native American students may be participating in their coming-of-age ceremonies. These can be held up as examples of commitment and faith. Students are usually aware of the rites of passage that go on in

the lives of their classmates. We can choose to celebrate those moments as a faith community. Catholic students are often impressed and even motivated by the religious devotion of their friends in other traditions.

Boston is doubly blessed for the exploration of other religious traditions: it has a rich diversity, and it is home to educational institutions committed to increasing people's awareness of that diversity. The Pluralism Project at Harvard ([www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/)) has made available a directory of reli-



illustration by Elaine Kohner

gions that I use with my students. We have gone on trips to a Hindu temple, a Buddhist meditation center, and an Islamic center. Direct experience is a fundamental part of forming the skill of encountering other religions. For class projects, students have contacted Sikh *gurdwaras*, Zoroastrian fire temples, Jewish temples, Lutheran churches, and countless other worship centers. My students conduct an interview with someone of a religion different than their own as a final project. They provide visual aids or physical objects that are used in worship while they relate to us anecdotes of their subject's life as an adherent to

another faith. This is the type of experience that breaks down the stereotypes that are so dangerous and tempting if we remain insular in our worldview. This assignment also provides my students with practical experience as ambassadors.

Not everyone teaches in a locale as rich in diversity as Boston, but many of us have access to the Internet, where students can contact adherents of other religions around the world. The Pluralism Project publishes a nationwide directory, in addition to the one for Boston. Listings of religious organizations are available in libraries and on the Internet. *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*, edited by Arthur J. Magida (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999; reviewed in this issue) gives contact information for many official religious organizations in the United States.

When teachers think of interreligious dialogue, the images that come to mind may include a United Nations committee, a papal conference for prayer, or peace talks over disputed holy land. But the interreligious dialogue that our students will engage in will more likely be with their college roommate, with their auto mechanic, or with their employer. They will probably be engaging in much more of this dialogue than we can presently imagine. The question for Catholic educators is not whether to prepare our students for those encounters, but how we can most effectively do so.

**Jonathan Yü-Phelps** teaches religion classes at Newton Country Day School in Massachusetts, where world religions is a required course. Jonathan has been a leader for several Saint Mary's Press workshops, and is working on a revision of our *Teaching Manual for World Religions*.

## from the classroom

### Wrestling with Diversity

*Christine Navarro and Lorraine Kilmartin*

How do we welcome non-Christians into our schools and our religion classrooms, and at the same time give witness to our own Christ-centered faith? How do we invite students to learn from and respect other faith traditions without sending the message that Catholics believe that all faiths are equally true? These are questions that thoughtful teachers recognize as gateways to the lifelong faith journey. We have a model for dealing with these questions in the story of Jacob, who wrestled all night long with an angel, refusing to let go until he received a blessing. A real act of courage on a teacher's part is to resist the urge to provide answers, which we know will be less than adequate, and to instead invite students to embrace the questions. While this activity may not relate directly to a topic in your course outline, it would be appropriate when local community members are celebrating a holiday such as Purim or Tet. You could also tuck it away for future use; inevitably, at some point during the semester, a student in your class will raise a question about the relative value of other faiths, and you could schedule this lesson in response.

1. Provide four types of significantly different snack food for your students, such as candy, cookies, chips, and fruit. Allow each student to choose a snack, and then group the students according to their choices. (You may need to have more than one group for each snack choice, depending on the size of the class.) Direct the groups to list all the reasons they had for choosing as they did.

2. Assign each group one of the following position statements in favor of their snack choice:

- Explain the virtues of your snack without reference to other choices.
- Favorably compare your snack to other snacks, but without criticism.
- Explain that your snack is superior by criticizing other snacks.
- Explain that each snack has its virtues, and support your own choice.

Groups may draw from their list of reasons but are not limited to those ideas. Invite the students to record their feelings or thoughts as they listen to each group's presentation.

3. When the presentations are over, discuss the students' reactions to the different approaches. Ask the students to note that there are good qualities to all the snacks. Lead a discussion with these or similar questions:

- How is comparing snack food preferences similar to discussing religious beliefs? How is it different?
- Which arguments had the most merit? Why?
- If the snacks had been religions, which approaches would have been the most respectful? the most disrespectful? Why?

4. Using the chalkboard, note that there is a continuum of possible responses to diversity.

- In an attempt to be open-minded and accepting, many people choose relativism as a way of dealing with conflicting beliefs so that they end up valuing all things equally. Relativism represents one end of the continuum.

- Candidates for political office sometimes choose the other end of the continuum. We have all seen ads where candidates try to win the audience over by making their opponents' ideas look inadequate, without ever stating their own views.
- When we discuss other religions, we are affected by both of these strategies. While relativism is respectful of diversity, it doesn't leave room for passion, or even for evaluation. Criticism of other points of view is clearly passionate but not particularly respectful.
- The Catholic church finds a mark somewhere toward the middle of the continuum. Catholics value the path of salvation through the church more than they value the path offered by other faiths, but they also respect the many good aspects of other faith traditions. Catholics would say that affirming belief in one's own tradition does not discount the value found in other faith traditions.

5. Pose questions such as these for the students to discuss in groups or to address in journals:

- Does interfaith dialogue ever make you question your own faith?
- What makes it hard or easy to listen to others' faith statements?
- What makes it hard or easy to state your own beliefs?
- What is the value of interfaith dialogue?

6. Conclude by sharing the following ideas with the students:

- Remaining loyal to our own faith among other religious traditions requires a certain level of spiritual

## resource reviews

sophistication. We may find ourselves seesawing between a belief that other religions could be just as true as our own and a belief that our own faith tradition is the truest.

- It is natural to feel defensive when our own faith is challenged, and it is also natural to want others to share the benefits we've found in our own faith.
- While the Catholic church believes that all people are saved by Christ, it also teaches that people who have never encountered Christianity can still be touched by God so as to be saved (*Catechism*, nos. 846–848).
- In the *Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965), the church teaches, "Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture" (no. 2).

7. Conclude the lesson by asking the students to write in their journal or notebook a "Jacob question" that arises for them from today's discussion and the following quote from the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 1965): "Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church, nevertheless, still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize" (no. 7). Encourage them to bring this question to prayer.

If you are planning a visit to a house of worship outside your own tradition, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies* edited by Arthur J. Magida (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), will be invaluable. Whether your itinerary includes a mosque, a meeting house, or an Orthodox church, you'll be well prepared if you consult this two-volume resource first. What should I wear? Will I be expected to do anything? Should I bring a contribution? Can I take pictures? All of these questions, and others, are answered. The books devote chapters to the major world religions as well as to several Protestant denominations. Each chapter begins with a brief description of the tradition's history and important beliefs, and an explanation of the typical worship service. Next comes a description of holidays, major life cycle ceremonies (such as initiation and marriage), and ceremonies that take place in the home.

These volumes would be handy classroom references for world religion teachers; other religious studies teachers will find this resource useful for answering the inevitable questions that students have about their encounters with other faith traditions. Teachers of any subject will find that these books offer insight into the faith experience of their students who are not Catholic. Available from Jewish Lights Publishing, P.O. Box 237, Sunset Farm Offices, Route 4, Woodstock, Vermont 05091; phone 802-457-4000; fax 802-457-4004; orders 800-962-4544.

### Tolerance on the Web

The Web site [www.Tolerance.org](http://www.Tolerance.org) offers a wealth of resources for teachers, students, and parents. The site's three-fold structure offers

resources for awareness (Tolerance Watch), action (Do Something), and reflection (Dig Deeper). The tone of the site is positive and inviting, and the sections for young people are colorful and fun. The search feature is especially useful for students and teachers wanting current, relevant information on a variety of issues. The site features reviews of videos and books, information on classroom resources, and lots of activities to use with students. There is also a guide for writing grant proposals, and the Southern Poverty Law Center offers funding to teachers who are implementing tolerance projects. Visitors can subscribe to *Teaching Tolerance* magazine and purchase high-quality, low-cost materials.

*Teaching Religious Tolerance*, an online lesson plan, is the work of teachers who have attended the Columbia Education Center's summer workshop. Interdisciplinary in nature, the lesson explores what religious freedom meant when the United States was founded. The site provides excellent resources and activities for the classroom. Visit the Web site [askeric.org](http://askeric.org), click on "lesson plans," and enter "teaching religious tolerance" in the search text box.



illustration by Elaine Kohner

## from the press

### Religious Diversity

In a world characterized by diversity, it is important to complement our knowledge of ourselves with an understanding of our neighbors.

**World Religions: A Voyage of Discovery**, by Jeffrey Brodd, gives students a rich overview of the faiths of the world using non-technical language to explore religious traditions, presenting the various traditions' answers to the fundamental questions of life.

- Sidebars provide personal encounters with practitioners of each religion.
- Activities help students deepen their understanding of the material.
- Full-color photographs, art, and maps bring the world's religions alive.
- A glossary (with pronunciations) defines unfamiliar terms.

Check out our Web catalog, [www.smp.org](http://www.smp.org), for a more complete description and online sampler. Text: paper, 272 pages, \$20.50; teaching manual: spiral, 301 pages, \$24.95.

### New Resources for the Classroom!



**The Bible in History Timeline**, modeled after the timeline featured in *The Catholic Youth Bible*, includes twice as many entries in both human and biblical history.

Seven special biblical timeline sections are highlighted:

- Biblical Prehistory
- Time of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs
- Time in Egypt and the Exodus
- Time of the Judges
- Time of the Kings and Prophets
- Time of Foreign Domination
- Time of the New Testament

To supplement the entries, illustrations and photographs of important biblical and historical people and places are included. At eleven inches high and twelve feet long, the expanded edition timeline lends perspective to the vastness of biblical and human history. A highly informative and colorful teaching tool, *The Bible in History Timeline* answers the need for a high-quality biblical and human history timeline for the home or classroom. Poster: laminated, rolled, and packaged in a tube, 11 inches x 12 feet (in 4 sections), \$24.95.

### Stories Bring Lessons to Life!

Check out two new collections of short stories that complement our textbooks. The short stories in ***Holy Terrors and Gentle Souls: Stories About the Saints***, by Stephanie



Weller Hanson, bring to life the real struggles of ten beloved saints and Christian heroes. The engaging stories about Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Ávila, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and others invite readers to reflect on how, throughout church history, the Holy Spirit has called people to become more than they ever thought they could be. Paper, 160 pages, \$6.95.

The companion ***Leader's Guide*** includes suggestions for using the stories with groups and cross refer-

ences to themes in the textbook *The Catholic Church: Wisdom, Journey, and Mission*. Stitched, 32 pages, \$5.00.

Sibyl Niemann's ***The Centurion and the Songbird: Stories About the Gospels*** presents ten short stories that retell Gospel narratives. Each story takes the point of view of a character from the Gospels—Thaddeus, Olivia, Mattathias, and others—providing an “inside” perspective on the Gospels.



Stimulating and engaging, these stories read deeply into the biblical story, bringing the Bible's message and characters to life and opening hearts to new, imaginative understandings. Paper, 136 pages, \$6.95.

The companion ***Leader's Guide*** includes suggestions for using the stories with groups and cross references to themes in the textbook *Jesus of History, Christ of Faith*. Stitched, 32 pages, \$5.00.

To order these and other books, write to Saint Mary's Press, Orders Department, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1320; phone 800-533-8095; fax 800-344-9225; or order online at our Web site, [www.smp.org](http://www.smp.org).

### Saint Mary's Press Adds a New Department

Saint Mary's Press is going face-to-face and heart-to-heart with educators, ministers, teens, and parents through its new Faith-Building Services department. The new department, which formed in July, consists of Shirley Kelter of Sauk Prairie, Wisconsin; Leif Kehrwald of Portland, Oregon; and Tom Zanzig, Brian Singer-Towns, Penny Koehler, and Pamela Johnson of Winona, Minnesota.

“Our new department is a natural for us,” says Pamela Johnson, director of the new department. “Adding workshops, retreats, training, and consultation to our offerings is deepening our relationships with the people we serve, expanding our editorial creativity, and moving us ever closer to fulfilling our mission. Being face-to-face with so many people across a year gives us a fabulous opportunity to come to new understandings about need and partnership. We are being blessed at every turn.”

The new services department’s historical roots go back to 1995 when Saint Mary’s Press began developing a vision of “The Catholic High School as Faith Community.” Saint Mary’s Press invited teachers, campus ministers, and administrators from Catholic high schools throughout the United States to come to Winona, Minnesota, to spend four days exploring the power of recognizing and celebrating the essential role of all the people



who make up a high school—the teachers (all teachers, not just the religion teachers); the students; the maintenance, kitchen, and office staff; the school nurse; counselors; principals; and parents.

“From those early beginnings, we now offer seven different work-

shops,” says Penny Koehler, assistant director. Visit our Web site at [www.smp.org](http://www.smp.org) and click on the “Workshops” button to see descriptions of the following offerings:

- “The Catholic High School as Faith Community”
- “Fresh Stream of Living Water: Celebrating and Fostering Faith Community in the Catholic High School”
- “Nurturing Spirituality with Faculty and Staff”
- “Live It! Peace, Justice, and Service in the Catholic High School”
- “Bringing Catholic Youth and the Bible Together: How to Use

the Bible More Effectively with Junior High and High School Teens”

- “Welcoming the Teen Years: Thriving Not Just Surviving!” A workshop for parents and young people ages 10–14.
- “Sacred Relations: Raising a Spiritual Family.” A workshop for parents and grandparents of children of all ages.

To talk with someone on the staff of the new Faith-Building Services department, phone 800-533-8095 or e-mail Pamela Johnson at [pjohnson@smp.org](mailto:pjohnson@smp.org).



### Prayer for Those Who Minister to Youth After the Tragedy

This prayer was posted on the “Walking with Teens After the Terrorist Attacks” Web site at [www.smp.org/tragedy](http://www.smp.org/tragedy) less than twenty-four hours after the attacks occurred. Increasingly, teachers find themselves preparing to enter classrooms full of tear-stained and anxious faces. At these times, prayer is essential.

### Called to Be a Healer

*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.*

Lord, you have entrusted these young people to my care. They are filled with questions, fear, even hatred about the tragic events that have shaken our nation and our world. How do I begin to respond to them?

First, help me to trust that you will give me whatever grace and courage and wisdom I will need. Then, let me be open to your peace and healing in my own heart, for I too, Lord, am plagued by questions, fear, and yes, moments of harboring hateful feelings toward our enemies. Finally, help me be available—with time and presence, a listening ear and heart, and simply, with love. And if there is some action we can do together to help those in need, show us the way and give us the tools and stamina and passion that we need.

Thank you, gentle Lord, for the gift of these precious young people, and help me walk with them, quietly, peacefully, reassuringly.

Amen.

**Acknowledgments**

The first quotation on page 2 is from *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes, 1965)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1965), number 29 (emphasis added).

The second quote on page 2 and the second quote on page 5 are from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1975), numbers 7, and 2. Copyright © 1975 by Reverend Austin Flannery, OP.

The first quotation labeled *Catechism* on page 5 is from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for the United States of America, numbers 846–848. Copyright © 1994 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica* copyright © 1997 by the USCC—Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

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