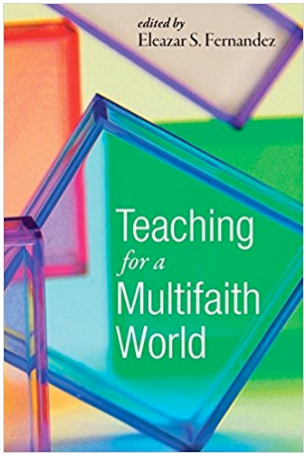



## Teaching for a Multifaith World

Fernandez, Eleazar S.
Pickwick Publications, 2017

Book Review

Tags: inter-religious teaching and learning | interfaith teaching and learning | multifaith education | theological education

**Reviewed by:** R. Jane Williams, *Moravian Theological Seminary*
**Date Reviewed:** December 12, 2017

The public arena of the 21st century has become one in which religious intolerance and inflammatory and questionable assertions about religions and specific groups of people are not only acceptable to many persons but are frequently invited and modeled by community leaders at many levels of mainstream American culture. Religious leaders who might model critical public engagement and expose ignorant and dangerous misrepresentations of whole faith communities are rarely represented in media. Meanwhile, current data suggests that more than 25 percent of married couples in America are interfaith. How do seminaries prepare students to minister in a global society where fear, lies, and misunderstandings are rampant and where interreligious understanding and cooperation are so essential to human survival and community?

Most seminaries have already recognized one basic assertion of this book -- that seminary teaching is not about pouring stable and unchanging religious content into our students. Healthy seminaries of the 21st century are called instead to help students grow deep and secure roots in their faith tradition such that fear of the Other will be replaced by curiosity and engagement while appreciating, practicing, and honoring their own faith identity. Such secure attachment to their faith identities will help students minister in the multifaith contexts they are likely to encounter while offering pastoral care in any community they serve. Fernandez and his colleagues offer thought-provoking, creative chapters on spiritual formation, curriculum development, multifaith pastoral care, and public ministry in the age of terrorism and over-the-top propaganda, lies, and misunderstandings that have created the fear and isolation of American religious and secular culture.

*Teaching in a Multifaith World* includes chapters that address seminary education from the

perspective of theoretical lectures and models to practical guidelines and principles. For example, in chapter 3, Mary Hess asserts that current students benefit from the almost universal experience of video gaming and are more open to collaborative learning, recognition of human fallibility, and acceptance of change than faculty may believe. Today's students, she believes, are used to learning from experience, reflection, retrying, and developing skills at noticing differences and similarities that provide clues to choices they need to make. Hess advises faculty to build on these skills by exploring in vivo experiences of relationship with those of other faiths. Multifaith learning need not relativize beliefs as having equal truth but should ground students in humility that enables engagement with other faiths while deepening one's own religious roots and identity. Helping students explore rather than debate the verity of other faiths decreases the fear that comes from ignorance and diminishes the power of fear-based claims and labels propounded in the public sphere.

Kujawa-Holbrook's chapter is the capstone of the volume and begins by asserting that "Interreligious learning emanates from the collective belief that we are all, despite our religious differences, part of one human community" (199). She offers aspirational characteristics of healthy religious communities that can be generalized to most congregations. Communities of faith must first be able to sustain relationships of mutual care and respect that embody belief in the dignity of every human being within their own community. Healthy relationships within one's home community become indicators of healthy relationship potential with those outside one's own community. Hospitality is not just a welcome sign on the door, but includes an awareness of food choices, timing of Sabbath, and an open-hearted welcome of strangers. The proliferation of multifaith families presents congregations with opportunities for interreligious understanding (as opposed to conversion possibilities) as the presence of such families unearths hitherto unknown varieties of holiday celebrations, birthing and funeral traditions, premarital counseling needs, and a multitude of other learnings.

While many experienced faculty were trained to offer the stable and enduring truths of a given faith perspective, post-modern and post-colonial studies have created recognition of the need for fluency in the changing nature of knowledge and the importance of self-awareness of one's perspective and experiences such that knowing, honoring, and speaking from one's specific religious identity involves openness to engagement with others in a spirit of curiosity and respect. Seminaries and their graduates have a role to play in helping to create bridges between different communities (religious and other) rather than walls. Those seminaries moving toward building bridges would do well to assign *Teaching in a Multifaith World* as required faculty reading.

Published by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion
301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
(765) 361-6047 (800) 655-7177 fax (765) 361-6051
Fully Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and Located at Wabash College

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