Editorial Introduction: Interreligious Studies

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I will introduce this Special Edition on Interreligious Studies (IRS) not just with a description of the papers, but also with an account of the term itself which may be new to many readers, yet is one that is becoming increasingly prevalent in academia. Indeed, it is apt that this Special Edition appears in the same year that the American Academy of Religion has, for the first time, included a Group on ‘Interreligious and Interfaith Studies’. (While some wish to distinguish the two, I understand the terms as variants of the same broad nexus of interests).

A growing number of books and articles are starting to give shape and voice to what IRS is (to mention but some: Leirvik 2014a, 2014b; Hedges 2012, 2014; Patel 2013; Stanton 2014), while a growing number of universities have chairs, appointments, or courses in the field (see Leirvik 2014a). Meanwhile a good number of academic journals exist in related areas, arguably the most significant being Studies in Interreligious Dialogue, but also including well-established and new ones like The Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Dialogue Studies, Buddhist-Christian Studies, Interreligious Insight (the successor to World Faith’s Encounter) and the Journal of Inter-Religious Studies (formerly the Journal of Interreligious Dialogue); as the names suggest some of these have a narrow remit, others a broader one. The AAR group ‘Call for Proposals’ will give us some indication of the broad nature of the field: ‘The Group invites… proposals that critically examine modes of response to religious pluralism from multiple disciplinary perspectives’, going on to include, amongst many others, such areas as ‘Mapping the discourse of interreligious studies’, ‘Critical reflection on race and gender in the interfaith movement’, ‘Interfaith pedagogies’ and ‘Theologies of interreligious encounter’ (IIS 2014).
As the above suggests, IRS is a diverse rather than a strictly limited field; indeed, I would suggest it is a meeting point of a set of interests and research areas rather than seeking to become a new disciplinary area itself. As a minimal definition, IRS concerns studies of at least two religions (but it also includes non-religions or secular worldviews) and the dynamic encounter or relationship this entails, but I would add to this the following:

something ‘becomes’ Interreligious Studies when it engages with at least some of the following five areas in a scholarly way. One: the issue of religious encounter as a dynamic lived reality—even if this is done as textual study—and concerns the ‘inter’ of ‘Interreligious’, which has an interest in the relational aspect of religion and the dynamic change and interaction of traditions. It is not simply noting interesting comparative observations. Two: it is interdisciplinary which is seen as necessary because religion is understood very much as a multi-layered reality, which cannot be penetrated nor properly understood through one approach. While any particular scholar may, naturally, specialise in one area this is done in relation to other disciplines. Three: while not necessarily engaged in activism, it often is, and does not see a clear boundary between the scholar and the practitioner, such that the theological questioning is not separated off from scholarly reflection, although one may not see oneself as a theologian in any specific tradition (Pagan, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, etc.). However, the active dynamic of engagement between traditions is often what inspires Interreligious Studies. At one level such activism concerns the practise of interreligious dialogue which may not simply be formal or informal meetings amongst faith communities, but can also take place between scholars, with, for instance, Christian and Muslim theologians working not just alongside each other, but mutually engaging and enriching each other. Four: and linked in to the previous point, it recognises that the researcher, teacher or student is an agent implicated in negotiations of power for there is no neutral value-free position. As such it involves self-critical reflection in that dynamic as an agent or practitioner, while also recognising that religion is not static but involved in individual and group identity at many levels. Fifth: it pushes at the hegemonic boundaries, either within academia about such things as disciplinary boundaries or within religious traditions which may seek to maintain dominance. This is often about questioning those who want to keep identities tied down, or else it plays with the boundaries of traditional categories, for instance in exploring dual religious belonging or identity (Hedges 2014).

This description is intended to allow a broad spectrum of research to be included, and so aims to give focus without seeking to be prescriptive. I recommend readers who are interested to look to others definitions (cited above) for further accounts, and turn now to the five papers in this Special Edition, which reflect something of the variety within IRS. I introduce them alphabetically.

Reinhold Bernhardt’s paper deals with an issue that is increasingly of concern within IRS, and broader research fields associated with it, the question of what are often known as multireligious identities. A rich and
growing literature exists on this, and within this Bernhardt’s paper provides a particular angle by looking at ‘the multireligious identity formation that is encountered in everyday life in the Western world’ as distinct from most studies either on, what he terms, ‘religious virtuosos’ or ‘the Asian religio-cultural environment’. Notably, this paper seeks to interpret this by looking at the issue of identity and identity formation which is also central to another paper in this collection, that of Hedges. Bernhardt argues for an understanding of ‘identity-in-difference’, which he suggests makes sense of multireligious identities, and shows how ways of looking at religious belief and practise exist which help contextualise such practises within the ‘everyday’ practise of Western Christians. In terms of IRS, the question raises the dynamic of changing patterns of religious identity in increasingly multireligious societies, and the way that traditional religious authorities and traditions may need to reflect upon and react to the growing practise of people rather than sticking to authoritarian or doctrinal measures of identity and belonging.

Cathy Byrne’s paper takes a look at the question of education in the context of multireligious societies, in particular looking at the UK and Australia and the way that their respective educational systems have responded to providing a wider curriculum in relation to social changes. With a focus on the notion of social inclusion, she examines the ideology and practise of each system within its own context. Notably she argues that the UK has been far more successful in developing an approach to education which takes account of a diverse multireligious society, whereas she concludes that Australia has opted, on the whole, for the “majority justifies privilege” notion. As an area within IRS, it is worth noting that Byrne’s paper contrasts with Bernhardt’s, taking a sociological rather than a theological agenda, and looking not at questions of religious belonging and identity, but broader social issues and factors. Importantly, IRS suggests that such studies, which may traditionally sit within quite different departmental or faculty boundaries, need to be in contact; part of what IRS as a field does is to seek to bring this interdisciplinarity together.

The third paper is co-authored by Ruard Ganzevoort, Mohammed Ajouaou, André van der Braak, Erik de Jongh, and Lourens Minnema who bring together their experiences of designing a curriculum for interfaith pastoral care in an academic context in the Netherlands. This includes Christian, Secular, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist elements, as well as those that can be termed both ‘intrafaith’ and ‘interfaith’. This article presents not only coverage of an area which has little literature of its own, although there is a growing interest in it; it also provides an insider understanding of the development, nature and issues of developing such a programme, and as such it is, I suspect, likely to be an important paper
for those working in this area. In terms of it as a contribution to IRS, I would suggest that it adds an interesting strand to those we have mentioned before as it takes very much an activist, or practitioner, perspective from those involved in working in pastoral education, but also sets out an outsider account of the issues, and so stands somewhere between the first two papers mentioned in bringing together theological and social issues. Indeed, in that it reflects the interreligious meeting and conversation of the authors it clearly meets one of our criteria for IRS.

Paul Hedges’ paper further develops the theme of identity that has been encountered in Bernhardt’s paper, and seeks to bring contemporary social identity theory into dialogue with discussions within IRS. It is suggested that this is necessary because although identity is often invoked in many academic discussions it is often done with little clarity or precision, and so social identity theory is brought in to add more rigour and precision to discussions. To provide a context, the paper looks at the theology of religions typology of exclusivisms-inclusivismspluralism-particularities and looks at how the typological debate and the paradigms conceive of identity. It is argued that traditional Christian thinking in this area conceives identity in monolithic and problematic terms, for as social identity theory shows us, identity is always plural and shaped by diverse contexts. An argument is made that only the pluralist model, understood as radical openness to the Other (classical pluralisms can be equally monolithic in conceptions of identity), is capable of being reformulated to think of identity in new terms—indeed, it may be suggested that the thrust of the argument coheres well with Bernhardt’s argument about the need to rethink identity in contemporary multireligious contexts.

The paper by Marianne Moyaert turns to yet another issue, the question of ritual participation in the rites of another tradition. In contrast to Bernhardt and Hedges who argue, in different ways, for what can be seen as an openness to multiple traditions, Moyaert sounds a cautionary note. Looking at the practical issues of attending to embeddedness within traditions, she suggests that it is not easy to engage with the traditions of another, and that any simplistic understanding of commonality does not take note of the particularity of each. (This is not necessarily in contradiction to Bernhardt and Hedges, but certainly show that a pluralist approach is not a simplistic panacea). She also carefully looks at the question of what religion is within Religious Studies to ground her arguments. Again, Moyaert’s work is a sign of another strand within IRS which pays attention to internal debates within religious traditions to comprehend how they deal with religious diversity.

Between them, the five papers engage a wide range of disciplines including theology, sociology, education, social psychology and ritual
studies, which demonstrates something of the range within IRS. They also point to very different ways of approaching the question of religious diversity and the dynamic encounter between traditions, while I would suggest that each one takes on interdisciplinary issues, or at least has an awareness of these. Moreover, across the five papers—to a greater or lesser degree in each—the question of power relations is raised with issues of who gets to determine identity and authenticity being raised, and I suggest there is also a clear reflexivity in many papers which demonstrates an awareness of the researcher’s own position in creating and maintaining the discourses engaged with. Certainly there is no suggestion that these papers cover all, or even most, of the key questions and issues in IRS—which are numerous and diverse; however, it is hoped that almost every researcher or student engaged, or identifying, with the field will find something of interest, whether it be new insights, perspectives, or questions, which will help develop the growing conversation around what IRS is and the significance of the issues it grapples with.

References

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