

# LESSONS FROM THE *BUILDING ABRAHAMIC PARTNERSHIPS* PROGRAM AT HARTFORD SEMINARY

By Yehezkel Landau  
Faculty Associate in Interfaith Relations  
October 2007

## I. Professional Background and Institutional Context

Since June of 2004, Hartford Seminary has sponsored an interfaith training program for Jews, Christians, and Muslims called *BUILDING ABRAHAMIC PARTNERSHIPS (BAP)*. An eight-day intensive course, aimed at developing basic concepts and skills, is offered every January and June as part of the Seminary's Winter and Summer terms. In addition, the first advanced-level leadership training for veterans of the basic course was conducted over five days this past July. I have served as *BAP* Program Director since its inception, as a Faculty Associate in Interfaith Relations at the Seminary. In this capacity I have designed, coordinated, and taught in both courses. My responsibility also includes financial and logistical administration, enlisting other members of the teaching staff, and recruiting participants.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I describe the two levels of this innovative program and offer a preliminary assessment of its effectiveness. It is still evolving, partly in response to participants' evaluations and accounts of their experiences.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tuition income alone could not cover the costs of the program. I am profoundly grateful to the three foundations whose funding has made *BAP* possible: The Henry Luce Foundation, the William and Mary Greve Foundation, and the Alan B. Slifka Foundation.

Hartford Seminary is known nationally and internationally as a Christian institution for theological education with a highly regarded Macdonald Center for Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations. My appointment to the faculty in the fall of 2002 added a Jewish dimension to the communal life and academic program of the Seminary. The interfaith conversation was broadened from a bilateral dialogue to an Abrahamic triologue, while retaining the specialized focus on Christian-Muslim relations. My role as *BAP* Director reflects the Seminary's commitment toward a more inclusive interreligious agenda, as well as my own professional interests and commitments. From 1978 until 2002, I lived in Jerusalem and was active, as a dual American-Israeli citizen, in various interreligious peacemaking efforts involving Jews and Palestinians. In the 1980's I directed the staff of the *OZ veSHALOM-NETIVOT SHALOM* religious peace movement, and from 1991 until 2003 I co-founded and co-directed the *OPEN HOUSE* Center for Jewish-Arab Coexistence and Reconciliation in Ramle, Israel.<sup>2</sup> For over twenty years I also taught Jewish tradition and spirituality at several Christian institutes and ecumenical centers in Israel.

In Hartford, I continue my involvement in Jewish-Arab peacemaking through Open House and other grass-roots initiatives. My conviction remains that, without an explicit spiritual dimension, political agreements will fail to overcome the enmity and mistrust on all sides of the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict. I have a 19-year-old son, Raphael, who is currently a soldier in the Israeli army. It is for the sake of his generation, and those

---

<sup>2</sup> For information on *OZ veSHALOM-NETIVOT SHALOM*, see [www.netivot-shalom.org.il](http://www.netivot-shalom.org.il); for information on *OPEN HOUSE*, see [www.friendsofopenhouse.org](http://www.friendsofopenhouse.org). See, also, my research report "Healing the Holy Land: Interreligious Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine," Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, *Peaceworks* No. 51, September 2003.

following, that I am committed to the work of interfaith reconciliation. I am convinced that, if we fail to find spiritual remedies for our political ailments, we are condemning our children and grandchildren to even more hellish violence perpetrated by religious extremists and reprisals by governments. In both Judaism and Islam, saving one human life is tantamount to saving the whole of humanity. With so many innocent lives in the balance, I believe we are obligated by God to eliminate walls of separation, to overcome mutual misunderstanding and prejudice, and to work incessantly for inclusive justice, genuine peace, and the healing of wounded hearts.

Educational initiatives like *BAP*, while so urgently needed, are tragically stymied in the Middle East right now by political, cultural, and psychological obstacles. The success of *BAP* is partly due to its setting, the United States in general and Hartford Seminary in particular. The Seminary's history of sponsoring interreligious encounters, studies, and events is one conducive factor. Also, Hartford is situated in the heart of New England, making it accessible to students along the east coast, from Washington, D.C., to Maine. Some of the almost 190 participants in the eight *BAP* courses conducted so far have come from more distant places, including Alabama, Colorado, Wyoming, California, western Canada, the Netherlands, Israel, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Nigeria, Indonesia, Singapore, Pakistan, and St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Since there are sizable Jewish and Muslim communities in New England, we can draw students from all three traditions relatively easily. Equally important is the presence of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in the greater Hartford area. This allows for visits to synagogues, mosques, and churches for the worship experiences built into *BAP*. The local congregations that have welcomed

*BAP* students to their prayer services have been very gracious and accommodating. The ongoing relationships with local congregations are beneficial for the *BAP* participants who interact with them, for the congregations that are enriched by the curiosity and insights of the visiting students, and for Hartford Seminary in sustaining relationships with local communities of faith.

One last introductory point: using the term “Abrahamic” in the name of the program evokes the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim, a shared spiritual ancestor and role model for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Such terminology is not unique to *BAP*. Many interfaith dialogues use “Abrahamic” as an alternative to “monotheistic.” Aside from the symbolic and sentimental value of using Abraham in this way, the wisdom in this choice is debatable. In the compendium of supplemental readings for the basic *BAP* course, I include two articles that question whether Abraham is a unifying figure at all. Both articles are written by rabbis. Their reservations are motivated by different factors, but their conclusion is the same: each of the three traditions has “its own Abraham,” and evoking the patriarch risks fostering division as readily as harmony.<sup>3</sup> Another problematic issue is raised by Prof. Ingrid Mattson, my Hartford Seminary colleague and the current president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). She rightfully cautions that holding up Abraham/Ibrahim for veneration and emulation risks excluding Sarah and Hagar (and potentially all women) from the picture.

---

<sup>3</sup> Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “Abraham and ‘Abrahamic Religions’ in Contemporary Interreligious Discourse,” in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, Volume 12, Issue 2, 2002, pp. 165-183; and Rabbi Avi Safran, “Avraham Avinu—the ‘interfaith superstar,’” in the *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, October 11, 2002, p. 11.

## II. Program Rationale and Goals

To my knowledge there is no Jewish-Christian-Muslim training program similar to *BAP* at any other seminary or religious studies department.<sup>4</sup> The lack of other such initiatives, more than six years after September 11, 2001, amazes me. By now it should be abundantly clear that all our faith communities need help to overcome mutual ignorance and estrangement. Because this is a painful process, we need trained clergy, educators, and facilitators to help us confront the exclusivism and triumphalism that have, at times, turned each of our sacred traditions into a weapon of unholy war.<sup>5</sup> In a U.S. Institute of Peace *Special Report* issued in February, 2003, Rev. Dr. David Smock, who directs the U.S.I.P.'s Religion and Peacemaking Initiative, wrote:

The overarching question is how to develop interfaith trust in the prevailing atmosphere of fear and mutual suspicion. In situations of trauma, as experienced continuously in the Middle East and as experienced in the West since 9/11, people are likely to turn inward. Accordingly, they have great difficulty in reaching out to the religious 'Other.' The prevailing attitude is often that no one's suffering can compare to our own suffering. In this climate of victimhood, the Other—whether nation, ethnic group, or religious community—is often labeled simplistically and unhelpfully as either good or evil.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> A U.S. Institute of Peace *Special Report*, written by Rev. Dr. David Smock and entitled "Teaching about the Religious Other" (Washington, D.C., July 2005), summarizes presentations by 16 participants in a two-day workshop on programs and curricula for teaching about the Abrahamic Other, in America and abroad. I took part in that workshop, sharing information about the *BAP* program (p. 4).

<sup>5</sup> For examinations of how our understandings of the sacred can be used to justify violence, see R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000; Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002; Oliver McTernan, *Violence in God's Name: Religion in an Age of Conflict*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; and Ian Markham and Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', editors, *September 11: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002. For an analysis of how Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Islam especially) can be forces for both conflict and reconciliation, see Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Smock, David, "Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear: An Abrahamic Trialogue," *Special Report* 99, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, February 2003, p. 3.

Overcoming ignorance is one challenge. Imparting information to enhance knowledge and understanding is standard fare for institutions of higher learning. This is certainly one of the aims of the *BAP* program. Three full days are devoted to presenting the basics of each tradition: historical development, beliefs and practices, denominational variety, and attitudes to other faiths. Yet there is another challenge that such a program has to address to be effective: helping participants overcome their fears and suspicions of one another.<sup>7</sup> Conditioned reflexes, including competing victim scripts, are very difficult to transform. Building trust takes time. It also takes a willingness to acknowledge and question one's own emotional investments: the need to be right, the assurance of being special if not superior, resistance to change, and loyalty to a faith community with its history and behavioral norms. For most Jews and Christians, the *BAP* program is their first opportunity to engage Muslims. For most of the Muslim participants, it is their first encounter with Jews. Such face-to-face meetings demand a level of openness and vulnerability which few people have the courage to risk. Those who rise to the challenge have to confront suspicions from co-religionists, even accusations of disloyalty. This is not an easy burden to carry. An interfaith activist soon learns that *interreligious* cooperation needs to be complemented by *intrareligious* work in our respective communities. The latter keeps us grounded in our own traditions and communal loyalties. At the same time, it enables us to sensitize our co-religionists to the challenges and benefits of interfaith encounter.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a Jewish approach to these challenges, see Jonathan Magonet, *Talking to the Other: Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims* (London: I. B. Taurus & Co., 2003), especially chapter two, "The Challenge to Judaism of Interfaith Dialogue" (pp. 11-22), and chapter 8, "Risk-taking in Religious Dialogue" (pp. 90-106).

How much can be accomplished in a one-week course? Surprisingly, a great deal—though everyone involved in *BAP* acknowledges that the January or June program is only the first step on a lifelong journey toward deeper understanding and, ultimately, spiritual fraternity and solidarity. The *BAP II* advanced training which we piloted in July deepens relationships forged in the basic course, and it strengthens interfaith leadership skills which participants can apply in their own communities.

The four goals of the *BAP* program reflect serious intellectual and emotional challenges: (1) educating participants about the beliefs and practices of the three Abrahamic traditions; (2) creating a supportive learning community in which clergy, lay ministers, religious educators, and chaplains can forge mutually beneficial relationships across communal boundaries; (3) helping participants acquire pastoral skills useful in interfaith work; and (4) developing leadership strategies for promoting interfaith relations in increasingly heterogeneous societies.

To achieve these goals, I assemble a teaching staff for each round of the basic course comprised of five Hartford Seminary faculty members and three “pastoral adjuncts,” clergy from each of the traditions with experience leading local congregations. The Seminary professors other than me are present for designated segments of the program, while the rabbi, minister, and imam accompany the course with me from beginning to end. The three clergy adjuncts are expected to share their theoretical and practical expertise and to intervene when pastoral difficulties arise. Personal discomfort can provide a potentially rich learning opportunity for that individual and the whole group.

Each *BAP* round has an appreciable number of such opportunities, and to address them we have evolved a two-pronged strategy:

(1) At the outset of the course, participants are told that their comfort zones will be challenged during the week and that we need a consensual agreement to maintain fidelity to our overall goals. A list of ground rules for respectful dialogue (as opposed to debate) is read aloud and adopted. When necessary, these ground rules are reiterated to bring the group back to its agreed-upon norms for communicating;

(2) When someone hears a statement that irritates or offends, s/he is encouraged to say “ouch!” so that the group can address that person’s feelings in real time. Often the “ouches” are sparked by one person speaking on behalf of an entire faith community, with co-religionists feeling misrepresented. Conversely, if someone experiences surprise and delight in learning something new, s/he is encouraged to say “wow!” Krister Stendahl, my Christian mentor and friend, calls this “holy envy,” and he considers such an experience to be the ideal outcome of interreligious encounter. In *BAP*, there are usually more “ouches” than “wows,” requiring sensitive and effective leadership to facilitate the group process productively.

### III. Content of *BAP I*

The content of the basic course is half academic and half experiential, in keeping with its intellectual and affective goals. Students taking the course for credit are required to submit two assignments: a 15-to-20-page research paper and a personal journal recording

their insights and feelings during the week.<sup>8</sup> The academic element of the program consists of

- the three days devoted to each of the three traditions, mixing frontal presentations and facilitated discussions; these include treatments of controversial topics, often the subjects of widespread misconceptions and prejudices—for example, what Israel and Zionism mean to Jews, or what the Trinity means to Christians, or what *jihad* means to Muslims;
- three evening sessions devoted to specific subjects, with resource persons from each of the traditions facilitating the discussion and offering input as a panel: one evening on “What Do We Mean by Spirituality?” (with interfaith triads exchanging accounts of religious experiences before the panel offers reflections); one on “Religion and the Media,” featuring three professional journalists from the newspaper and television industries sharing examples and insights from their work; and a very practical session on “Sensitivities and Skills for Interfaith Partnerships,” with the group generating its own list of successful strategies, frameworks, and interactive methods for establishing Jewish-Christian-Muslim relationships;
- and three half days of comparative text study, in four small groups and plenary discussions. The texts we choose for examination are of two kinds: passages that evoke inclusive justice, peace, and loving behavior; and others that are problematic, at least to outsiders, for they seem to summon the faithful to exclusivist or belligerent behavior toward those who are different. In the first rounds of the course, the text study took place before the day-long introductions to the three

---

<sup>8</sup> I have the privilege of reading and grading the materials submitted. The journals, in particular, have taught me a great deal about how the course, including the interactions outside the classroom, impacts the students.

faiths, but we found that it is more effective to have the overviews first and then the text-study, to make the passages more meaningful to those who are not familiar with their neighbors' scriptures.

The experiential dimension of the basic course includes:

- worship in a mosque on Friday, a synagogue on Saturday, and a church on Sunday, followed by group discussions of the respective prayers and practices;
- two to three artistic or symbolic exercises providing non-analytic (“right-brain”) modes of self-expression;<sup>9</sup>
- and long lunch and dinner breaks to encourage fellowship and networking. Many participants have reported that these mealtimes are the best part of the course, allowing them to cross boundaries, overcome fears and prejudices, and forge new friendships.

---

<sup>9</sup> At the opening dinner one of two exercises is used for self-introductions and initial group bonding: (1) three condiment containers (clear salt and pepper shakers plus an opaque bottle of soy sauce) are presented as representing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Participants are asked to group them so that two traditions (represented by the salt and pepper shakers) are deemed closer in nature than either is to the third (the soy bottle), and to explain this choice in their self-introduction. Three alternatives are possible, and each is valid according to its own criteria for relating the faith traditions. Many Jews and Christians use the soy bottle to represent Islam, which is “opaque” to them. Often Muslims and Jews see Christianity as the “opaque” and distant Other, finding more affinities between Islam and Judaism as ways of life centered on normative behaviors like dietary rules. A few students resist the premise of the exercise, and they either refuse to do it or they change the rules, e.g., by suggesting that the ingredients of all three containers be poured into one vessel; or (2) an 8” x 11” piece of paper with a serrated border, representing a postage stamp, is given to each student. Everyone is asked to draw his or her own religious stamp, serving as an “ambassador” image to adherents of other religions. Colored markers are provided, and each person gets a chance to share her/his stamp and explain its symbolism.

On the last day of the course, before the closing dinner, large A3 sheets of paper are disseminated, each with a blank circle surrounded by the words *shalom* (in Hebrew), *a-salaam* (in Arabic), and *peace*. Participants use colored markers to draw their visions of interreligious peace. Then they share the results in turn, while sitting in a circle, after which the group walks around the circle in silence, looking closely at each of the drawings placed on the chairs. This exercise helps participants see how the week has affected them intellectually and emotionally, and it provides successful closure to the course.

Over seven rounds of the basic *BAP* course, some common denominators stand out in regard to content. On the day devoted to Jewish tradition, the brief introduction to the meaning of *Shabbat* and how it is observed by Jews invariably elicits “wows” from Christians and Muslims. Participants are generally intrigued by unfamiliar spiritual disciplines in each other’s lives. Understandably, the discussion on how Jews view Israel and Zionism, and how Christians and Muslims respond, is emotionally charged. To minimize polarization and to illustrate religiously motivated peacemaking, I screen two video clips on the *OPEN HOUSE* peace center in Ramle, Israel. When Imam Yahya Hendi, a Palestinian-American and a Hartford Seminary graduate, is one of the pastoral adjuncts, he and I model respectful dialogue about the Middle East and sometimes embrace each other tearfully by the end of the session. The students can see, from our example, how Jews and Muslims, including Israelis and Palestinians, can be allies in religious peacemaking instead of adversaries.<sup>10</sup>

For Islam, it is the *hajj* pilgrimage and the five daily prayers that evoke “wows” of “holy envy” among Jews and Christians. Prof. Ingrid Mattson, in her presentation, counters misconceptions about Muslim women and helps the students understand the

---

<sup>10</sup> See our co-authored article, “Jews, Muslims, and Peace,” in *Current Dialogue*, Vol. 41, June-July 2003, Geneva: World Council of Churches, pp. 12-13. In the *BAP I* course this past June, an unfortunate, but educationally significant, incident occurred in my modern Orthodox synagogue on *Shabbat*, following the morning prayers. The rabbi conducted a question-and-answer session for the *BAP* students and some members of the congregation, as he had done several times before. This time the Middle East situation became the focus for intense, and increasingly bitter, exchanges. A few Jewish congregants got defensive and made some bellicose statements which hurt the Muslim students (including four women from Damascus, Syria) and undermined for all of us the “safe” environment we had created over the week. Later that afternoon the whole group re-convened at the Seminary to process what had happened. Many tissues were consumed as students and teachers shared their pain over the verbal assault, along with mutual affection and care. Despite the shock and pain caused by this experience, it proved beneficial in taking the group to a deeper level of empathy and solidarity with one another. It did leave me thinking, however, about how to better prepare the members of my synagogue for the challenge of hosting non-Jewish visitors for interreligious conversation.

difference between the teachings of Islam and the different cultural manifestations (including distortions of the normative tradition) in nominally Muslim societies. Christians react in different ways upon learning that Muslims revere Jesus and Mary but do not accord them divine or superhuman status. Some Christians are pleased by this positive outlook toward their Lord and his mother. But others are disturbed, feeling threatened by another tradition that has its own view of Jesus, as prophet rather than savior. The Jewish participants, on the whole, are fascinated by this conversation but are outside it, since Judaism essentially ignores Jesus.

On the day allotted to Christianity, Prof. Ian Markham starts with a very effective exercise, evoking surprise and irony: On the blackboard he writes the word “God,” followed by “Trinity,” “Incarnation,” “Bodily Resurrection of Jesus,” “Virgin Birth of Jesus,” “Hell, Demons, and Satan,” “Substitutionary Atonement,” “Historical Inerrancy of Scripture,” and “The Incompatibility of Christianity with Evolution.” He asks the Christians to raise their hands if they believe in God, and all the Christians do so. Then he goes down the list, and hands drop as the different doctrinal claims are considered, with the more liberal Protestants experiencing increasing discomfort, doubt, or outright disbelief. Ian then asks the Muslims in the group to do the same exercise. The Christians (and Jews) are amazed to discover that the Muslims affirm more of the classical Christian doctrines than do many of the Christians, since they are also taught in the Qur’an. This is a wonderful teaching moment, as Muslims and Christians, with Jews joining in, discuss the authority of sacred texts, the nature and meaning of revelation, and the place of

subjectivity and rational criticism in the interpretation of scriptures. These concerns surface again when we study texts in all three traditions on Thursday and Friday.

#### IV. Shared Worship

A few additional aspects of *BAP I* are worth highlighting. The formal worship in the mosque, synagogues, and churches toward the end of the course, as well as the devotions offered by participants at the start of the morning and afternoon sessions, are two complementary experiences that are spiritually and symbolically enriching. In the discussions over lunch that follow the public prayers on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, participants ask clarifying questions and share “ouches” and “wows” that emerged for them during the worship. By the end of the week, Jews and Christians have generally overcome any initial apprehensions over entering a mosque, a new experience for almost all of them. The Christian and Jewish women feel solidarity with their Muslim sisters at the mosque, as they don headscarves (helped by the Muslim women) and share the same-gender piety in the women’s section. Through their first-ever experience at a synagogue, whether modern Orthodox or Reform, Muslims develop a deeper appreciation of how Jewish tradition and the Hebrew language are so close to Islam and Arabic. At least one Catholic participant had what she called a “theophany” when the Torah scroll emerged from the Ark and was carried around the synagogue, with congregants singing and kissing the Torah as it passed.

On Sunday, the discussion over lunch following the Episcopal and U.C.C. church services helps to clarify denominational differences among Christians, and it allows Jews and Muslims to honestly share any discomfort they may experience in Christian worship. This emotional estrangement is particularly acute for Jews when a New Testament reading or sermon refers negatively to “scribes and Pharisees,” or “the Jews” in the Gospel of John are castigated, or some other subject that has engendered Jewish-Christian animosity over the centuries arises. These are the moments, holistically engaging head and heart and gut, where I believe *BAP* is most interpersonally genuine, spiritually and ethically concrete, and ultimately transformative in positive ways. For it is, above all, the hurt and the fear which we all carry that we are challenged to confront honestly and work through together. Theological discussions take us only part of the way toward reconciliation. Without the honest exchange of negative feelings and conditioned resistances, we are not being true to ourselves or to one another, and we are not living up to what this era of history demands of us. Instead, we are playing it safe by remaining superficial and abstract. It is necessary, but insufficient, for example, for Christians to examine, together with Muslims and Jews, the theological underpinnings of Christological prayers and hymns, or the meaning of a sacrament like the Eucharist. What Christians also need to know and understand is that most Jews and Muslims will react to these central aspects of Christianity with profound spiritual and emotional dissonance, sometimes even revulsion, engendering self-protective distance. This response is far deeper than cognitive disagreement. It is a kind of “spiritual allergy,” a discomfort that touches the soul. And it is precisely this kind of reaction—by anyone in

an Abrahamic dialogue—that needs careful and caring examination, once sufficient trust has been established within the group.

One Jewish psychologist shared her experience in the program with members of her Amherst, MA, synagogue during a *Shavuot* sermon in June, 2005:

Through my encounter with Muslim and Christian prayer, I understood more clearly our rabbis' entreaty that prayer be the vessel for the eternal fire of Divine love that burns away the separate self. ... with a heart of humility, we need to listen to these and those voices, Muslim, Christian, Jewish so that the agony of splintered time will cease, so that we may find our way to *shleimut*, wholeness.

It is worth adding that there is a deliberate attempt in both the basic and advanced courses to include musical selections and artistic exercises, in order to add an aesthetic dimension that engages the heart and soul as well as the intellect. There is also a conscious attempt to make the several *kosher/halal* meals that are eaten together—supplementing the unprogrammed meals during the participants' free time--experiences of consecrated fellowship. Blessings from all three traditions are offered before the food is taken. All these exercises and experiences are ritualistic expressions of community across theological boundaries, and they create soulful bridges that allow for less inhibited exchanges in the classroom.

When people of different faiths share a prayer experience, the question that arises is: are they praying together as one fellowship, affirming a common set of religious truths, or are they spectators in each other's worship settings? Either mode of worshipping together is possible, and each has its own legitimacy and value depending on the desired

outcome.<sup>11</sup> The last day of *BAP II*, the advanced course, is consciously designed to give participants experience with both kinds of liturgies: single-faith prayers and inclusive worship. Any of us may choose to opt out of a prayer experience because of conditioned resistances or sincere theological reservations. For example, in the very first *BAP I* course, some conservative participants (primarily Muslims) felt uncomfortable when the U.C.C. church we attended gave its blessing to same-sex relationships through some hymns. Over lunch afterwards, some of the participants shared their discomfort and said they would have preferred to watch the service from the balcony, establishing a clear distance from the congregation. In subsequent rounds of the course, this option was offered to the students in order to prevent such spiritual discomfort.

#### V. Other Factors in the Success of *BAP*

I want now to reflect on the intersection of the qualitative and the quantitative dimensions of *BAP*. In order for the program to succeed, there has to be in each round a critical mass of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Ideally there should be a minimum of eight from each tradition, particularly to ensure sufficient diversity in the small groups. This recruitment goal requires a lot of effort, and it sometimes necessitates allocating scholarship assistance to achieve parity among the three subgroups. A minimum number from each faith yields two interrelated outcomes. The first is “safety in numbers” for the participants, not feeling so “alone” or underrepresented in one’s own subgroup. The

---

<sup>11</sup> For an example of a Christian participant observer analyzing Jewish prayers and customs, see Harvey Cox, *Common Prayers: Faith, Family, and a Christian’s Journey Through the Jewish Year*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001; and for a chronicle of a Jew’s journey through Christian and Muslim devotional rites, see Yossi Klein Halevi, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew’s Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*, New York: William Morrow, 2001.

second is a more enriching experience for everyone in the course, with a strong and diverse group representing each of the Abrahamic faiths. Once assembled, the participants need to feel that their needs are honored, that everyone is treated equally with no favoritism shown, and that the ground rules for respectful communication are adhered to. In the classroom and outside, the pastoral support of the teaching staff is sometimes required to meet these needs. At other times the participants themselves demonstrate mutual solidarity by supporting one another emotionally and practically (e.g., carpooling from the hotel to the Seminary or sharing a picnic in nearby Elizabeth Park).

One noteworthy experience happened in the second round of *BAP I*, and so far only in that round. Among the participants were six African-American Christians, a sufficient number to make race as relevant an issue as religion. This necessitated greater sensitivity and responsiveness, from the other participants as well as the teaching staff. It also brought additional “ouches” and “wows.” One Jewish participant, for example, objected to the use of the term “Zion” by African-American Christians, sparking a difficult but educationally valuable discussion. One adaptive outcome was to add an optional visit to an A.M.E. Zion church service on Saturday evening.

The teaching staff for a program like *BAP* clearly needs to have the pedagogical skills needed for both interfaith exploration and community building. The pastoral skills of the three clergy-adjuncts and the program director are crucial. The four professors who are present for shorter periods also need pastoral sensitivity, along with their academic expertise, in order to teach effectively within this framework. Frontal lectures, which may

be sufficient in other courses, need to be enhanced and deepened by facilitated discussions on the relevant material. The formal text study oscillates between small group examination of assigned passages and plenary discussions in the main classroom, with the professors and pastoral adjuncts co-leading these sessions. The students, for their part, come to appreciate the unique gifts of each faculty member. Some students may see the teachers as “official” representatives of their respective faiths. When this role is projected onto a teacher, a student may be disappointed if his or her tradition is presented in a way that does not conform to preconceived notions. This frustration can be minimized if the issue is addressed directly by the teachers themselves. The course staff includes both academics and clergy adjuncts so that the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of interreligious encounter are honored and addressed. As I say at the opening dinner, the course is not called “Interfaith Relations 101,” but rather “Building Abrahamic Partnerships,” because we are engaged in an active process of forging and nurturing relationships. This is a process that takes effort. It requires compassionate acceptance of each person’s uniqueness, and it tests our commitment to work together for a common goal.

The characteristics of the sponsoring institution—both advantages and limitations—also need to be considered. At Hartford Seminary, liberal white American Protestants have been in the majority since the school was founded in 1834. They still are the predominant group, welcoming into their midst Muslims and Jews, along with Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and racial or ethnic minorities, as part of the school’s mission to foster conversation across communal barriers. No one is *explicitly* privileged or favored

as a result of the Seminary's history, but some *implicit* cultural norms and nuances are inevitably at work. My Muslim colleague Abdullah Antepli and I are both sensitive to the conditioned apprehensions, the cultural cues, the gestures of hospitality, the dietary requirements, the prescribed prayer times, and the nonverbal communication styles of non-Christian minorities. This sensitivity serves to make the ambiance at Hartford Seminary more inclusive for *BAP* participants. And this inclusiveness helps to overcome feelings of marginality or alienation that representatives of minority groups might otherwise feel.

Another feature of the sponsoring institution is its academic "neutrality," which tends to relativize the truth claims of any religious tradition. On academic turf, even with the Christian roots of Hartford Seminary, Jews, Christians, and Muslims can meet as intellectual and spiritual equals. This adds to the safety factor: no one need fear that the institution is promoting a particular theology. In fact, the only "mission" that Hartford Seminary now espouses is advancing interreligious dialogue and understanding. This makes the Seminary a suitable place for conducting Abrahamic conversations. If *BAP* were sponsored by a synagogue, church, or mosque—or an agency like the Synagogue Council of America, the National Council of Churches, or the Islamic Society of North America—the underlying assumptions and resulting dynamics would be quite different. Once none of the faith traditions is privileged, the power dynamic shifts to favor all of them rather than any one. By this logic, it might be argued that a religious studies department in a secular university would be an even better setting for *BAP*. But a counter-consideration, no less compelling, is that Hartford Seminary's ethos encourages

spiritual expression, not only intellectual exploration. Devotional experiences within the classroom, over shared meals, and at the various houses of worship are celebrated rather than just tolerated or analyzed intellectually, as might happen at a university.

Another political consideration is that of gender equality and inclusiveness, given that each of the three Abrahamic faiths has a history of male dominance or patriarchy. Within *BAP* we try to ensure equal representation of women and men on the teaching staff and, if possible, a gender balance among the participants. Despite our best efforts early on, it was only from the fourth round of *BAP I* that we succeeded in pairing an academic from the Seminary faculty with a pastoral adjunct of the opposite sex. I believe this contributed to making the subsequent courses more successful. The gender balance also pre-empts a collective feminist “ouch,” as occurred in the second round of *BAP I*, when some Christian women demanded time in the program to present their own perspective on Christianity. Having women clergy and professors on the teaching staff provides female role models for both women and men, demonstrating that women have their own distinctive contributions to make toward interreligious partnerships.

## VI. The Advanced *BAP* Training

After examining the challenges and achievements of *BAP I*, I want to briefly report on the July *BAP II* pilot and its own lessons for Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations. Like the basic course, *BAP II* began with a dinner on Sunday evening, allowing the participants (12 Christians, 3 Muslims, and 3 Jews) to introduce themselves and enjoy an initial experience of fellowship. The rest of the course ran from Monday morning until

Friday evening. The primary goal, which shaped the content of the course, was to help participants develop conceptual frameworks and practical skills for interfaith leadership. The second major goal, a process objective as in *BAP I*, was to create an educationally enriching interfaith community based on trust and respect. The combination of competent resource people as instructors and facilitators, the variety of educational experiences during the week, and above all the chemistry of the group, contributed to the success of the course.

Rev. Karen Nell Smith and Imam Abdullah Antepli (both participants in *BAP I*), served as my co-facilitators throughout the week. Our aim was to expose participants to concepts and methodologies that would enhance an interfaith leader's "tool kit." The five theoretical and skill areas we focused on, one per day, were:

1. facilitating interfaith activities and workshops;
2. compassionate listening and nonbelligerent communication;
3. comparative study of sacred texts;
4. spiritual resources for conflict transformation; and
5. designing interfaith worship.

In addition, we chose five symbolic themes with universal resonance for the devotional offerings that began each day: *light/fire*; *water*; *earth/soil*; *tree*; and *bread-and-table*. The opening dinner featured an exercise in which everyone shared an object that had some personal symbolic meaning, as a means of self-introduction. We placed these on a table in the center of the room, as a kind of altar. We lit a candle in the middle of this table at the beginning of every morning and afternoon session. These and other ritual

elements lent the course a sacramental dimension, making it more than a strictly academic program. They also provided some spiritual coherence to the disparate experiences throughout the week.

Guest trainers led the morning and afternoon sessions for two of the five days—the Tuesday devoted to communications skills and the Wednesday devoted to comparative study of Jewish and Islamic texts. On the other three days, the various sessions were led by one or another of the three co-facilitators, while the other two were supportive allies ready to intervene when called for. Karen Nell, Abdullah, and I modeled distinct pedagogical styles, letting the group know when we were shifting from one to the other. In the mode of **training instruction**, one of us presented the rationale and concrete “hows” of a particular method for leading interfaith groups. The second mode, which we used more often, was **elicitive facilitation**, framing a subject and then drawing forth from the group its collective wisdom, often with a flip-chart for writing down spoken ideas. (In such instances, one of the other two facilitators acted as group “scribe.”) We occasionally used a video as trigger film and then facilitate inclusive conversation afterwards.

Friday was devoted to the practicalities of designing interfaith worship. This was the fifth and last of the skill areas chosen for the course, and we scheduled it on the last day deliberately. We planned the day’s program to move back and forth between single-faith prayers (in each of the three traditions) and opportunities to worship more inclusively. The whole group participated in, or was at least present for, Christian morning prayer at 9 a.m., Muslim *juma’a* prayer at 1 p.m., and Jewish prayers to welcome *Shabbat* before the

closing dinner. We used the Seminary Chapel for all the worship experiences that day. After the Christian liturgy, we convened in our regular space (the large Meeting Room near the Chapel) for our morning session, which was divided into two segments:

The first part was the most enriching elicitive discussion of the whole week because it focused on people's past experiences with interfaith worship, including those in *BAP I*. Since by then the participants were together intensively for a whole week, they developed sufficient trust to share honest feelings and questions. Prayer is a very personal act of faith, even when done in a communal setting; so talking about it can easily raise sensitive issues that are often not addressed in interfaith encounters. In the July course, one Christian man, for example, asked the Jews how they feel when some Christians adopt Jewish prayers like the "*Sh'ma Yisrael*" affirmation of God's Oneness. A rich discussion about the dangers of "spiritual plagiarism" ensued. At another point, Jews openly shared their fears and negative reactions when encountering a cross or other symbols in a church. We also addressed the sense of self-negation or inauthenticity that Christians can feel when giving up Christological language in order to accommodate Jews and Muslims in common worship. Participants later said, and I agree, that this was the most forthcoming and fruitful conversation on these issues that any of us had ever experienced.

The second part of Friday morning focused on personal religious practices. Several students volunteered to share with the group spiritual disciplines that connected them with the Sacred. The most inspiring moment came when Abdullah Antepi and Osman Oztoprak, one of the students, chanted a long series of couplets in Turkish based on Divine names in Islam. For all of us, it was an uplifting experience of genuine devotion.

These devotional offerings and discussion were a prelude to the “main course” of spiritual nourishment that afternoon: interfaith worship services in the Chapel led by two mixed groups of students who had worked on designing the liturgies since the previous day. I am sorry we did not tape these worship experiences, for no words can adequately convey their beauty and depth. Their inspirational content and the inclusive, participatory process by which they were conceived and led were extraordinary. These worship services demonstrated how closely connected the participants were by the end of the course and how such a creative spiritual undertaking can be a genuine blessing for everyone.

Leaving the subject of interfaith worship to the last day proved to be a sound decision. With a similar rationale in mind—waiting until sufficient rapport had been established—Karen Nell, Abdullah, and I felt that we should defer until Thursday, the next-to-last day, the challenge of engaging conflict situations from an interreligious perspective. In this regard, I want to examine one particular exercise during the afternoon session that day which left everyone dissatisfied, in some cases disturbed—though it was, at the same time, instructive in ways we did not anticipate. The night before, we screened the documentary film *Long Night's Journey into Day*, which addresses, in graphic and compelling terms, the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa. We then had a deep conversation, which I facilitated, about retributive vs. restorative justice as alternative paths to reconciliation in situations of violent conflict. This evening session was preparation for the next day's consideration of “spiritual resources for conflict

transformation.” At the end of the evening, the group was given three options as a focus for the following day: the topic addressed in the film (punishment vs. amnesty for confessional truth-telling), the relationship between religion and state in different countries, or the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict. The group decided, almost unanimously, to take on the tragic situation in the Middle East. I was pleased, since I have been engaged with this issue my whole adult life, and it is usually the “elephant in the room” when Jews, Christians, and Muslims meet.

We three co-facilitators had planned to use the “conflict spectrum” exercise to spark engagement with whatever issue was chosen by the group. This is a simple method<sup>12</sup> that quickly “maps” the range of viewpoints on any contentious issue and stimulates discussion in smaller or larger groups. The group is offered a question and is then asked to form a spectrum reflecting the range of answers, from one pole to the other and any point in between. The question I posed to the group was: “Do you think the Israeli side bears more of the responsibility for creating and maintaining the Middle East conflict, or do you think the Arab side, including the Palestinians, bears the greater responsibility?” Someone who thought the responsibility was evenly shared would position her/himself in the center of the room, while others would stand at varying distances from the middle in either direction, depending on what degree of responsibility was deemed to be on either of the two sides. (This way of posing the question leaves out the co-responsibility of outside powers like the United States and Russia). I should say that I did this exercise, using the same question, in another interfaith workshop, where it worked fairly well as a

---

<sup>12</sup> See *The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics* by Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright, Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006, pp. 49-51.

catalyst for small-group conversations. However, on this occasion, most of the people in *BAP II* balked at doing it, fearing that the good will from the first three and a half days would be undermined. They seemed to avoid the conflict they had chosen to confront.

As facilitator, I adapted to this situation, inviting people to say why they were so resistant. This discussion *about* the exercise, rather than doing it, helped participants see how difficult it is to actually engage the issue, and how different people display different conflict styles. (The latter is a subject we had addressed at the very beginning of our time together; students were asked, before the course, to fill out an online Conflict Style questionnaire and to bring the results with them). As we searched together for ways of addressing the Middle East conflict without threatening group harmony, I offered an alternative exercise which I have also used in the past: dividing into small groups representing different constituencies in the conflict, then presenting to the whole group a list of the interests and needs of “their” constituency. This proposal won the endorsement of the group, and they divided into mixed Jewish-Christian-Muslim teams representing (a) Israeli Jews; (b) Israeli Palestinians, or Arab citizens of Israel; (c) Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; and (d) Americans. Each of these groups produced a thoughtful list of needs and interests, and the exercise in working together to arrive at this outcome had its own value. (Interestingly, the “American” group ended up representing the U.S. administration, with a *realpolitik* approach, rather than ordinary American citizens who could be mobilized for people-to-people diplomacy or peace activism.) The whole group was not quite ready to seriously engage and transform conflict, within its own ranks and

in the wider world; but it did come to appreciate that a sensitive, step-by-step process is necessary to reach that point.

Evaluation forms indicate that the students in *BAP II* developed a range of concepts, skills, and sensitivities that will empower them as interfaith leaders in their communities. Their interfaith “tool kits” were enhanced, and the practical lessons they took with them will be food for thought and for action in their respective work settings. Even when exercises fail to meet some group members’ or facilitators’ expectations, the reasons for those disappointments are also instructive—in some cases, even more instructive than when everything proceeds without a hitch.

## VII. A Theological Underpinning for *BAP*

As I work for mutual understanding and solidarity among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, my own theological assumptions are constantly challenged. A key question is whether one can develop a theology, or multiple theologies, of religious pluralism to undergird the building of Abrahamic partnerships. One theology, acceptable to all, that accounts for religious diversity within God’s plan is inconceivable. The three traditions have disparate understandings of why the One God has allowed different, mutually irreconcilable theologies to coexist.

One can, of course, bracket the theological dimension entirely and promote interreligious encounter on the basis of practical necessity: Humanity as an endangered species requires collective effort in order to survive. No talk of redemption or

reconciliation is necessary, according to this utilitarian perspective. But *BAP* has a deeper goal. It seeks to heal the historic wounds that have traumatized us and left us, as Abrahamic siblings, estranged from one another. It has a vision of interreligious reconciliation and cooperation that is hopeful—one might even say messianic—for it is rooted in our shared summons to emulate God by living lives of justice, peace, and love. To overcome our deep-seated fears and to bring us closer to the hoped-for Kingdom of God, we need new religious paradigms. One of the obstacles to such new, visionary thinking is the narrow way in which our traditions have formed our identities.

Redefining our particular identities in other than dualistic ways (us vs. them, saved vs. damned, righteous vs. sinful), requires humility and an appreciation for human diversity as a blessing rather than a threat. The intellectual challenge of dialectically affirming the Oneness of God and the multiplicity of theologies is compounded by the emotional challenge of transcending our victim scripts and demythologizing the adversarial relationship with our traditional “enemies.” *BAP* encourages participants, in a relatively “safe” setting, to undertake both transformations, the intellectual and the emotional. The theological link between the two is the symbolic transfiguration of God (favoring more than one faith community), *of ourselves* (seeing ourselves as distinct but not superior or victorious over others), and *of our relationship with others* (as allies rather than adversaries).

Sadly, none of our traditions has adequately prepared us for this theological transfiguration, and that is why programs like *BAP* are needed. At this point in history,

humanity is in dire need of more inclusive religious concepts and norms for what it means to be faithful—to God and to one another. One direction for my own theological thinking is exploring the implications of seeing the One God as a “multiple covenanter,” inviting all of humanity (through Noah) and then different faith communities into complementary relationships of sacrificial service for the sake of God’s Creation. We need to explore together new ways of doing theology, new ways of living together, and new ways of integrating the two. In this spirit, *BAP* participants are pioneers venturing onto unfamiliar terrain, where we are all equal in God’s sight and where we all have unique insights to contribute toward a future of shared promise and blessing. Let us recall that in the Biblical account (Gen. 12:3), Abraham is promised: “in you all of the families of the earth shall be blessed.” It does not say that all of humanity will merge into one family. The verse implies, instead, that distinct family and faith identities will remain, but that we will all share a common blessing.

### VIII. Conclusion

As Jews, Christians, and Muslims sharing a fragile planet in a time of collective peril, we are called to face one another in repentance and humility. We all proclaim a messianic future unfolding and anticipated, but we have all failed to translate those proclamations into effective action. Instead, we have undermined our own beliefs and aspirations. We desecrate what we call holy, and we become our own worst enemies. Entrenched fears rooted in past or present traumas cripple our imaginations. Instead of envisioning a

future in which we are all redeemed and blessed, we compensate ourselves for our insecurities by fantasies of unilateral victory and vindication.

We need new theologies of inclusiveness that affirm the oneness of God and a plurality of ways to worship and serve God. We need new models of religious and interreligious education. We need pedagogies that help us grow in faithfulness to the tradition of our forebears while we learn from the traditions of our neighbors, affirming them as valid and valuable. Above all we need new understandings of those neighbors. We must come to know them not only intellectually through increased factual knowledge—*yeda'* in Hebrew, a cognitive knowing based on new *in*formation. More critical are new heart-understandings of each other, grounded in mutual affection and appreciation. In Hebrew this is *da'at*, the kind of intimate knowledge and spiritual *trans*formation that Adam and Eve shared after leaving the Garden and its childlike innocence.<sup>13</sup> None of us is innocent of wrongdoing. At one time or another, each of our religious traditions has been complicit in domination and mass slaughter. If we are to write a new historical chapter that redeems our tragic past and present, we need collaborative initiatives in mutual re-education. We should be corrective mirrors for each other, so that we do not repeat our past mistakes. Many of those mistakes originate in the act of projecting evil onto others rather than acknowledging it in ourselves. If we can be helped to see our own limitations and moral lapses through the eyes of our Abrahamic siblings, we have a chance to truly experience the Kingdom of God on earth. The beginning of redemption is the humble recognition that we need one another to be redeemed. *BAP* is one modest effort to foster that

---

<sup>13</sup> For examples of such transformation of the heart, see Yossi Klein Halevi, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, *op. cit.*, and Donald Nicholl, *The Testing of Hearts: A Pilgrim's Journey*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998.

recognition among Jews, Christians, and Muslims and to develop a praxis of partnership in that spirit.