Engaging Religious Diversity: Towards a Pedagogy of Mindful Contemplation

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Abstract: The growing presence of non-Christian religions in the U.S. creates a diverse religious climate. At the same time, this increasing religious diversity does not imply religious pluralism, a reality that includes participation in each other's lives. In this paper, I will propose a model for cultivating a pluralist approach to other religions while teaching college level religious studies courses. According to this model, in order to fully engage students in the appreciation of religious difference, one needs to apply a pedagogy of mindful contemplation. Studies in medicine and psychology have demonstrated that mindfulness meditation generates emotional and physical well-being, improves attention, memory, and cognitive flexibility. Furthermore, recent findings have attested that mindfulness decreases stress and fosters empathy among nursing students, social workers, psychotherapists, and primary care physicians. Many scholars have advocated the use of contemplative practices in higher education as a result of its holistic benefits such as transformative learning that occurs on affective and cognitive levels. In light of these findings, I will argue that mindfulness meditation (and other forms of contemplative practices) can become an effective means of encouraging the empathy, appreciation, and understanding of those who practice religions other than one's own. Researchers and practitioners of mindfulness meditation inform us that this practice fosters adaptive, flexible, and receptive awareness. In getting rid of fears and prejudices towards ourselves, mindfulness practice can become the first step to a more empathetic attitude towards others. I will propose that contemplative practices allow students to process unwarranted fears and prejudices they might harbor and transform them into a constructive engagement with actual religious differences.

Keywords: Transformative Pedagogy, Mindfulness Meditation, Contemplative Education, Religious Diversity, Pluralism

> "To know one religion is to know none."
> Max Mueller, *Lectures on the Science of Religion*
> May we Americans … reaffirm our determination to extend our love of brotherhood [sic] to all people on earth, and may we be guided by the collective wisdom of all world religions to save ourselves from self-destruction. Today our greatest fear is not nature. Our greatest fear is ourselves.
> C. T. Shen, *Mayflower II*

WHEN DESCRIBING THE phenomenon of global religious diversity, Diana Eck states that there is no other country where "the sheer range of religious faith" is as "wide as it is today in the United States."[1] She clarifies, however, that this dynamic diversity of religious life in the U.S. does not constitute pluralism. The

[1] Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: Harper, 2001), 5.

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presence of a variety of religious practitioners merely provides us with an opportunity for a whole network of interactions between diverse groups of people. This potential for inter-religious exchanges is for the most part not realized. It remains to be seen, argues Eck, whether we will be able to cooperate across religious difference and build a society in which we fully participate in each other's lives.[2] In this paper, I will propose a model for cultivating a pluralistic approach to other religions in teaching college level religious studies courses. According to this model, in order to fully engage students in the appreciation of religious difference, one needs to apply a pedagogy of mindful contemplation. Bringing the spirit of pluralism into religious studies courses is of paramount importance since this is one of the learning opportunities that introduce students to religious diversity. Contemplative pedagogy is particularly needed in our times when popular media and the internet become cultural shrines that furnish "a contemplative trance to millions of people, four hours on end, day after day, year in and year out."[3] Providing a method of directing this contemplative reverie towards issues of religious pluralism could be an effective means for classroom pedagogy.

Religious diversity is often tolerated, but Eck's vision of a pluralist society extends beyond tolerance. Tolerance is not enough because a genuine engagement with the other requires more than a tacit acceptance that difference exists. Rather, pluralism demands that we seek to understand others on their own terms, recognizing their particularities and differences. Neither is pluralism a theoretical construct; instead it is a lived reality of people who participate in each other's lives so deeply that they are mutually transformed. One's transformation does not need to connote relativism or syncretism, for "Mutual transformation does not result in new religions or in one universal syncretistic religion, but in the enrichment of the various traditions that results when their members are open to the inspiration provided by resources of others."[4] In other words, one's knowledge of other traditions could lead to greater appreciation of one's own religious identity. As a result of enlarging one's knowledge of other religions, one could value more deeply the particular contributions that one's own perspective offers.[5] Pluralism endangers neither religious commitments nor secular commitments. In contrast to relativism, pluralism celebrates actual differences and invites disagreements and debates. The goal of such an exchange is not agreement, but a transforming relationship.[6]

The manifold challenges of introducing a pluralist dialogue within the college classroom are recognized by various scholars. Some colleges, while in principle pluralist, have built-in structural biases that privilege some religious traditions over others. This happens particularly in those colleges that have historic connections to Christianity displayed through specific Christian rituals, myths, statues, and procedures. Thus, "Christian chaplains remain the key personnel in matters of religion in many universities, and Christian students often have more opportunities to benefit from chaplaincy activities."[7] The fact that many colleges feature Christian chapels, but lack multi-faith centers (or spaces is one example of institutional privileging. In addition, opening prayers at various college ceremonies not only reflect

[2] Eck, 22.
[3] Robert A. F. Thurman, "Meditation and Education: India, Tibet, and Modern America," *Teachers College Record* 108 (2006): 1766.
[4] Rita M. Gross, "Religious Diversity: Some Implications for Monotheism," *Cross Currents* 49 (1999): 349-366.
[5] Gross, 264.
[6] Eck, 72.
[7] Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Religion in Higher Education: The Politics of the Muli-Faith Campus* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 151.

uniquely Christian language but are often led by Christian chaplains. Such cultural bias can be equally well expressed in secular forms when religious diversity is overlooked in the name of secular ideology.[8] In both cases multi-religious voices are silenced.

In addition to institutional challenges, religious diversity in a classroom an element of discomfort present whenever issues of diversity (such as gender, race, or class) are discussed.[9] The tendency to display an attitude of hostility and superiority toward another religion usually stems from insecurity. People are inclined to take other valid points of view as threats to their own positions.[10] Rita Gross, a Buddhist scholar, points a way out of this logical impasse:

> … It is not necessary to build a psychology of self-esteem on the basis of denigrating difference. In fact, genuine self-esteem *cannot* be built on that basis. It grows out of a self-existing and noncompetitive comfortableness with one's self. When self-acceptance is manifest, divergence is intriguing rather than threatening. Therefore, it is important for the various religions to foster profound love of their own tradition in their members – a love mature enough not to be based on competitiveness and not to foster insecurity as a response to difference.[11]

The charge that Rita Gross makes to religious communities is clear, the charge of creating a healthy respect for their own religious traditions combined with a healthy respect for oneself. But how can one encourage a similar spirit in the classroom? How can we foster a transformative learning process that addresses both cognitive and affective domains? What teaching strategies would be most effective in cultivating openness to other traditions, an openness that eventually results in transformation?

In what follows, I will argue that a pedagogy of mindful contemplation is an effective method of introducing students to religious diversity. This is so because mindfulness meditation (and other forms of contemplative practices) complements current traditional approaches to higher education.[12] By privileging critical reasoning, traditional education (for the most part) fails to connect theory and practice, discursive reason and emotion.[13] In contrast, mindfulness practice facilitates a more holistic approach where emotions, one's values, and one's interdependence with the rest of reality are recognized. While mindfulness meditation originated in the Buddhist tradition, its practice has received plenty of attention in contemporary psychology and medicine, outside of its original cultural and religious context. Since the late 70s Western clinicians have incorporated the mindfulness practice into various

[8] Sophie Gilliat-Ray, 146.
[9] Michael J. Stoltzfus and James A. Reffel, "Cultivating an Appreciation for Diverse Religious Worldviews through Cooperative Learning in Undergraduate Classrooms," *Religious Education* 104 (2009): 542.
[10] Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 98-99.
[11] Gross, 361.
[12] Daitya Adarkar and David Lee Keiser, "The Buddha in the Classroom: Toward a Critical Spiritual Pedagogy," *Journal of Transformative Education* 5 (2007): 246-261; Phyllis Robinson, Meditation: Its Role in Transformative Learning and in the Fostering of an Integrative Vision for Higher Education," *Journal of Transformative Education* 2 (2004): 107-119; Tobin Hart, "Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom," *Journal of Transformative Education* 2 (2004): 28-46; Ed Sarath, "Meditation, Creativity, and Consciousness: Charting Future Terrain Within Higher Education," *Teachers College Record* 108 (2006): 1816-1841.
[13] Steven C. Rockefeller, "Meditation, Social Change, and Undergraduate Education," *Teachers College Record* 108 (2006): 1779-1783; Arthur Zajonc, "Love and Knowledge: Recovering the Heart of Learning Through Contemplation," *Teachers College Record* 108 (2006): 1744.

mental health treatment programs, from treating anxiety, stress, depression and pain to assisting those with eating disorders and alcoholism.[14] Recently, mindfulness meditation was linked with fostering empathy among physicians, nursing students, and social workers.[15] In addition, studies have shown that mindfulness training improves memory, cognitive flexibility, and helps in sustaining attention.[16] When practiced by college students, mindfulness lowers stress, increases their overall academic performance, promotes compassion and improves their cognitive skills.[17]

At the heart of the mindfulness meditation is the cultivation of an awareness of what is, an awakening to the now. This technique usually takes the form of a seated meditation in which practitioners pay attention to their breath. Whenever distraction occurs, attention to the breath serves as a reminder to always regain one's focus [18] The goal of meditation is to arrive at non-attached, yet fully engaged present-centered awareness. This is achieved by reversing our customary ways of thinking, of constant evaluating, and constant drifting into our past or future. Instead, one allows thoughts or feelings to be experienced without judging them as good or bad. The non-judgmental attitude leads, in turn, to forming an open-minded, flexible state of mind that is receptive to "what is."[19] Emphasis on process (acceptance of whatever comes one's way) rather than end-result (acceptance of pleasant events and thoughts) is directly responsible for facilitating psychological well-being. Our habitual thinking strives for the elimination of distressful states of mind and for the preservation of pleasant state of mind. However, efforts to control internal events by suppressing them or avoiding them are

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[14] S. Helen Ma and John D. Teasdale, "Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: Replication and Exploration of Differential Relapse Prevention Effects," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 72 (2004): 31-40; Michael Speca et al., "A Randomized, Wait-List Controlled Clinical Trial: The Effect of a Mindfulness Meditation-Based Stress Reduction Program on Mood and Symptoms of Stress in Cancer Outpatients," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 62 (2000): 613-622; G. Alan Marlatt et al., "Vipassana Meditation as a Treatment for Alcohol and Drug Use Disorders," in Steven C. Hayes, Victoria M. Follette, and Marsha M. Linehan, eds., *Mindfulness and Acceptance: Expanding the Cognitive-Behavioral Tradition* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2004), 261-287; J. L. Kristeller and C. B. Hallett, "An Exploratory Study of a Meditation-Based Intervention for Binge Eating Disorder," *Journal of Health Psychology* 4 (1999): 357-363.

[15] Michael Krasner et al., "Association of an Educational Program in Mindful Communication with Burnout, Empathy, and Attitudes Among Primary Care Physicians," *The Journal of American Medical Association* 302 (2009):1284-1293; Amy Beddoe and Susan Murphy, "Does Mindfulness Decrease Stress and Foster Empathy Among Nursing Students?" *Journal of Nursing Education* 43 (2003): 305-312; "Yu-Wen Ying, "Contribution of Self-Compassion to Competence and Mental Health in Social Work Students," *Journal of Social Work Education* 45 (2009): 309-323.

[16] Amishi Jha et al., "Examining the Protective Effects of Mindfulness Training on Working Memory Capacity and Affective Experience," *Emotion* 10 (2010): 54-64; Van den Hurk et al., "Greater Efficiency in Attentional Processing Related to Mindfulness Meditation," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 63 (2010): 1168-1180; Zeidan F. et al., "Mindfulness Meditation Improves Cognition: Evidence of Brief Mental Training," *Consciousness and C ognition* 19 (2010): 597-60.

[17] Doug Oman et al., "Meditation Lowers Stress and Supports Forgiveness Among College Students: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Journal of American College Health* 56 (2008): 569-578; Pamela Hall, "The Effect of Meditation on the Academic Performance of African American College Students," *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1999): 408-415; Shauna L. Shapiro, Kirk Warren Brown, and John A. Astin, "Toward the Integration of Meditation into Higher Education: A Review of Research." Accessed at http://www.contemplativemind.org/resources/research.html

[18] Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Usin g the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Delta, 1990), 39.

[19] Diane R. Gehart and Eric E. McCollum, "Engaging Suffering: Towards a Mindful Re-Visioning of Family Therapy Practice," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 33 (2007): 219.

nonproductive in the long run.[20] This is so because our internal experiences are impossible to control. Paradoxically, an accepting attitude provides a more effective way of dealing with challenging thoughts and emotions.

By focusing on present-moment awareness and self-reflection, mindfulness mediation could become a useful method when dealing with students' anxiety and discomfort when learning about other systems of belief. In the words of Barbara Vacarr, "The practice of mindfulness enhances and enlarges our capacity for empathy. It cultivates a sense of open curiosity toward each emerging moment, and it strengthens our ability to sustain a nonjudgmental stance both toward ourselves and in relation to the full range of our students' experiences."[21] It is precisely, this open and flexible stance that we hope for students to embrace when dealing with all issues of multiculturalism, including religious diversity. In fact, research on religious prejudice presents mounting evidence that religious people with a flexible and open-minded approach to religion are the least prejudiced and the most compassionate.[22] While the precise mechanism of this correlation has not been discovered, the studies show that this flexible religious orientation is more capable of embodying the ideal of unconditional love present in all world religions. "An individual who approaches religion in that way recognizes that he or she does not know, and probably never will know, the final truth about such matters. Still, the questions are deemed important, and however tentative and subject to change, answers are sought.[23] Open-mindedness, curiosity, and cognitive complexity are valuable because non-judgmental attitudes towards practitioners of other religions make a transformative learning possible. There is ample evidence that mindfulness meditation facilitates cognitive flexibility and openness, all critical skills when learning about other religions.

A number of scholars advocate employing mindfulness practice in order to promote holistic learning when teaching multiculturalism.[24] For example, Debora Orr proposes mindfulness meditation when dealing with feminist and other anti-oppressive discourses. She argues that mindfulness practice successfully challenges mind/body dualism present in all systems of domination.[25] In her own words, "These techniques [i.e. mindfulness exercises] can be used to address oppressive ideologies and practices in the lives of a students and thereby foster change not only on the intellectual level of a student's learning, but also on the levels

[20] Susan M. Orsillo et al., "Acceptance, Mindfulness, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy" in *Mindfulness and Acceptance*, 74-83; K. G. Wilson and A. R. Murrell, "Values Work in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy," in *Mindfulness and Acceptance*, 120-151.

[21] Barbara Vacarr, "Moving Beyond Polite Correctness: Practicing Mindfulness in the Diverse Classroom," *Harvard Educational Review* 71 (2001): 293.

[22] C. Daniel Batson et al., "'And Who Is My Neighbor?:' Intrinsic Religion as a Source of Universal Compassion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38 (1999): 445-457; C. Daniel Batson and E. L. Stocks, "Religion and Prejudice" in John F. Dovidio, Peter Glick, and Laurie Rudman, eds., *On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years after Allport* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 418-419; F. Crosby, S. Bromley, and L. Saxe, "Recent Unobtrusive Studies of Black and White Discrimination and Prejudice: A Literature Review," *Psychological Bulletin* 87 (1980): 546-563; S. L. Gaertner, J. F. Dovidio, "The Aversive Form of Racism" in J. F. Dovidio and S. L. Gaertner, eds., *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism* (New York: Academic Press, 1986), 61-89.

[23] C. Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis, eds., *Religion and t he Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 2nd edition,, 166.

[24] Leslie J. Thornton and Mary McEntee, "Learner Centered Schools as a Mindset, and the Connection With Mindfulness and Multiculturalism," *Theory Into Practice* 14 (1995): 250-257; Daniel Holland, "Contemplative Education in Unexpected Places: Teaching Mindfulness in Arkansas and Austria," *Teachers College Record* 108 (2006): 1842-1861.

[25] Deborah Orr, "The Uses of Mindfulness in Anti-oppressive Pedagogies and Praxis," *Canadian Journal of Education* 27 (2002): 479.

of body, emotion, and spirit, the levels where the most insidious and resistant formations of oppression are often lodged."[26] That is, in order to effectively attend to diverse forms of discrimination (sexism, racism, or homophobia), valorization of mind over body needs to be challenged. While Orr has not addressed the prejudice against other religions, such discrimination would clearly be included among the diverse forms of discriminations.

But, challenging the discrimination against the other is not simply a matter of a well-argued response. The mechanism of prejudice is often so deeply intertwined with our habits and implicit motivations that a much more nuanced approach is needed. David Kahane describes students' resistance in the context of teaching courses dealing with global justice. He argues that reflecting on moral principles is not sufficient to elicit a compassionate response towards those who suffer. Kahane contends that all of us who live in the privileged global north develop an attitude of "relative indifference to or dissociation from the suffering of distant strangers" that is resistant to change through traditional methods of teaching.[27] This is so because we develop a long list of habits (such as consumption habits) that "serve to soothe and deaden the anxiety that arises from a fear of directly experiencing suffering – others' and my own."[28] To successfully challenge these habits of privilege, Kahane maintains that one needs to attend to one's present-moment experience through the practice of mindfulness meditation. Only by becoming aware of the internal processes that cause disassociation from the sufferings of others can we reorient our lives in more compassionate and caring ways.[29]

The discomfort that arises from learning about other religions displays some similarities to the discomfort that comes from learning about the unbearable sufferings of distant strangers. Our society is religiously diverse, but still deeply separated by difference. Consequently, when learning about different traditions, students often develop an attitude of indifference or dissociation. According to one study, 58 percent of the American public thinks all religions are equally true, while 66 percent believe that the Christian teachings are the best way of relating to God.[30] It is not surprising then that students hold similar conflicting claims. Such claims could be another sign of profound dissociation from those who are religiously different. Thus, an attitude of hostility and superiority toward another religion comes from the fear that the very existence of other valid positions might invalidate one's own religious stance. Here, the habituated response is that of discomfort with difference, since students believe that this difference might threaten their well-being. A successful pedagogy, therefore, needs to deal with this perceived threat in addition to offering information about various religions. As in the case of challenging indifference to global injustice, indifference to religious diversity needs to be addressed by paying attention to the present-moment experience. Only by carefully processing the source of anxiety and discomfort when dealing with religious difference can students arrive at a more tolerant, appreciative, and engaged learning experience. This kind of learning experience does not simply confirm theoretical knowledge, but instead teaches how to live in a world characterized by religious diversity.

[26] Orr, 480.
[27] David Kahane, "Learning About Obligation, Compassion, and Global Justice: The Place of Contemplative Pedagogy," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2008 (2008): 49.
[28] Kahane, 52.
[29] Kahane, 57.
[30] Robert Wuthnow, "Presidential Address 2003: The Challenge of Diversity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (2004): 167.

Mindfulness meditation allows for a conceptual shift from our habitual attempt to avoid or end discomfort or suffering as soon as possible. When faced with suffering, a mindful person would be able to make important decisions without waiting for the unpleasant experience to pass.[31] It is one of our cultural myths to expect that with enough effort, one can arrive at a state of no conflict, no suffering and no adversity. Contrary to this notion, the goal of mindfulness practice is not to change our experience; rather it is to change our relationship to our experience. This changed relationship would imply befriending our thoughts and feelings about our own and others' religious views, whatever they are. By employing non-judgmental, accepting awareness of their own thoughts and emotions, students could develop not only a flexible awareness, but a more compassionate stance towards their emotional states. Sameet Kumar, a Buddhist scholar, observes that mindfulness and compassion are two interdependent aspects of Buddhist practice since mindfulness is "an extension of compassionate attitude, while at the same time compassion is necessary for mindfulness."[32]

Whether anger, frustration, hostility, or a sense of superiority, all emotions should not be perceived as the enemy, and should be welcomed. As the Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, states, "If we annihilate anger, we annihilate ourselves. … If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself. If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others."[33] Since from a Buddhist perspective, we are inextricably linked to all other beings, without compassion for ourselves we cannot extend compassion to anybody else. Getting rid of rigid, judgmental attitudes towards our own internal states awakens compassion for others and their religious views. Mindfulness not only helps to get rid of fears and prejudices towards ourselves, but also is the first step to a more compassionate stance towards others.[34] The less we cultivate dualistic attitudes towards our own thoughts, the less likely it is that we will promote the division into the rigid categories of "us" versus "them.

According to Thich Nhat Hanh, mindfulness practice affects the way we perceive those different from us. He states that mindfulness aims at destroying the convenient, yet dangerous, division of the world into "us" and "them." To him, taking sides implies a dualistic response motivated by anger that ultimately leads us towards polarization. In contrast, an appropriate response is one that strives for reconciliation and peace rather than conflict. At the heart of reconciliation is a love that embraces the whole of reality.[35] Integral to Nhat Hanh's argument is a Buddhist teaching of dependent co-arising which affirms "the interconnected and interdependent nature of all things."[36] Reality is not comprised of separate entities, but rather each being is inextricably linked to all other beings. Every part of the universe is constantly affecting every other part. Therefore, the well-being of each individual is interlinked with the well-being of the whole human race (not to mention the animal kingdom). We "inter-are" so deeply that "the only alternative to coexistence is co-nonexistence."[37] Taking sides does not make sense from this perspective, because every side is "our side."

[31] Gehart and McCollum, "Engaging Suffering," 2.
[32] Sameet M. Kumar, "An Introduction to Buddhism for the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapist," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 9 (2002): 42.
[33] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, C.A.: Parallax Press, 1996), 2nd edition, 53-54.
[34] Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 39.
[35] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* , 93.
[36] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Teaching on Love* (Berkeley, C.A.: Parallax Press, 1997), 55.
[37] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action* (Berkeley, C.A.: Parallax Press, 1993), 120.

Nhat Hanh's view offers valuable insights for the teaching of diverse religious perspectives. His holistic approach does not allow for delineating rigid boundaries between religious communities. Instead of stressing the insurmountable divisions among religious communities, Nhat Hanh invites us to embrace the ever growing religious multiplicity. Judgmental attitudes towards practitioners of other religions insert animosity that brings about divisions. Such divisions, in turn, lead to conflict instead of reconciliation. While this separation into "us" and "them" might never be completely overcome, Nhat Hahn thinks that the only way to extend compassion towards others is by aiming at a less polarizing attitude towards them. That is, while some religious perspectives might never become compelling to us, we need to move into the direction of recognizing the profound connections that we share with others as members of the same human family who have similar goals, needs, and concerns. Looking at inter-religious exchange from a perspective of interdependence does not deny the presence of diverse positions. Such an exchange celebrates actual differences and invites disagreements and debates among different traditions. As Rita Gross puts it, "…there is a deep and thoroughgoing appreciation of the different systems; their infinite variety becomes a source of fascination and enrichment rather than a problem."[38] While recognizing that we have different histories, traditions, and perspectives, we need to see that we share "the common qualities of love, understanding, and acceptance."[39] Because this shared vision is recognized, there is a freedom in expressing disagreements without damaging the fellowship with others. Such open dialoging acknowledges that truth can be received from outside of one's own tradition. As a result, one welcomes new insights from other religions that are missing or underdeveloped in one's own.[40]

Nhat Hahn's teaching on interdependence has inspired other multicultural pedagogies. Nina Asher develops a "pedagogy of interbeing" in order to employ the postcolonial and feminist perspectives on multiculturalism. She follows bell hooks in proposing an engaged pedagogy that emphasizes "wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit."[41] Borrowing from Nhat Hahn, Asher concludes that only after looking deeply into oneself, can one see that the relationships between the oppressed and the oppressors, the colonized and the colonizers are interconnected. Asher calls this approach a pedagogy of interbeing since only through a mindful realizations that we all "inter-are" can we move beyond the paralyzing dualism. Seeing all systems of oppression as interdependent realities, seeing that we all contribute to injustice, that we all are oppressed and also oppressors, allows for an empowering practice.

Whether considering postcolonial multiculturalism or global religious diversity, a pedagogy of mindful contemplation allows for teaching difference while rejecting the paralyzing dualism of "us" versus "them." Accepting all religions as offering fruitful solutions to life problems and recognizing their unique contributions could lead to an empowering practice. By employing mindful contemplation we can cultivate a spacious, nonreactive mindset that is open to mutually transforming dialog. A flexible response to a different religious perspective engages an active listening, "When you are willing to be secure enough in yourself to listen to what other people want and how they see things without constantly reacting, objecting, arguing, fighting, resisting, making yourself right and them wrong, they will feel heard, welcomed

[38] Gross, 358.
[39] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha*, *Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 11.
[40] Gross, 358; Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha*, *Living Christ*, 9.
[41] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14.

and accepted."[42] It is when we do not feel overwhelmed by the pull of our own emotions, when we arrive at the calmer and more centered self that we can be present more fully for others. By not following our ingrained reactive pattern, we create a space where an actual interchange of ideas and disagreements occurs, a space where the dissolving of the rigid boundary between "us" and "them" takes place. It is at this point that an authentic pluralism occurs. Holding fixed ideas, stereotypes, and feelings of superiority are no longer useful because one does not see another perspective as a threat. Appreciating other spiritual frameworks is possible since there is a recognition that "appreciation does not demand personal faith commitment to what one appreciates. Variety and difference among religions is the norm and a precious resource, not a problem."[43] Such a pluralistic exchange brings important gains to one's own religious tradition. In order to engage fruitfully in an interreligious exchange, one examines in greater depth the teachings of one's own tradition and learns to better appreciate its uniqueness and particularity. By participating in a dialog with others, one comes to appreciate the significance of one's own religious heritage and its rich relevance for one's daily life. Perhaps this is what Max Muller meant when he stated "to know one religion is to know none."[44] That is, only in a comparative engagement with other religions do we fully discover the meaning of our own tradition.

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[42] Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*, 375.
[43] Gross, 364.
[44] F. Max Mueller, *Lectures on the Science of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1872), 10-11.

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