

# Within and Beyond Religious Boundaries

## Welcoming the “Uninvited Visitor” through a Curriculum of Hospitality

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I must welcome the infinite. ...this is the first hospitality. (Derrida, 2002, p. 386)

**M**Y UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD as a Curriculum Studies scholar and human being (are the two synonymous?) has unfolded in a series of accumulated insights. As I continually add thoughts and experiences to the tangled pile in my mind and body, patterns eventually and suddenly emerge. Most recently the interconnections between curriculum and religion along themes of inclusivity and relationality beckon me to follow the stream of my unconscious and put words to the ineffable. For me, this is a re-searching of the individual parts to see a larger integrated whole. The following experiences led me to the impetus for the current paper:

### Experience 1

In a graduate level curriculum studies course in a program that espouses diversity, equity, and social justice at a primarily white university in a decidedly Christian state, a student emphatically proclaims, “I’m a Christian, and there is nothing that is going to change that!” I can’t recall the specific topic, but I do recall being surprised because, in my view, I nor anyone in the class had even hinted at changing anyone’s religious identity. It seemed as if they did not feel that social justice work was compatible with Christianity and that “liberal” education was trying to somehow change them. Despite growing up in a conservative Christian household myself, my “reading” of Christianity was different. Was there room for our differences?

## Experience 2

Serving on the dissertation committee of a student in the Curriculum Studies program, a student kept returning to the notion of her Judeo-Christian identity and linked it to her research topic. At first, this seemed unremarkable. But later, I began to wonder about the link between Judaism and Christianity. Having lived for two years in a rural, primarily Muslim village in Cameroon, students and colleagues told me stories from the Koran that were the same as those in the Christian Bible. This came as a quite a shock. Why didn't I know about this relationship before?

## Experience 3

As I pondered these two experiences, a memory suddenly popped out. Talking with one of my own professors whose spirituality lay outside of Western traditions, they remarked how strange it was that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam didn't "get along" better given that they had a shared lineage. Again, I had not considered this shared lineage and had accepted the split between a Judeo-Christian and Islamic points of view as obvious, so I tucked this away into my mental file cabinet.

Each of these experiences and comments opened a pathway for me to reflect on how curriculum and pedagogical practices (including my own) might be more inclusive of other belief systems. This seems impossible. How can I stay true to my own beliefs (religious, spiritual, and otherwise) while supporting others whose beliefs seem intolerable and exclusive and vice versa? It is in this spirit that the journey begins.

Perhaps I should state at the outset that it is not my intention to denigrate or minimize any religion. Nor do I view any religion as being better than or worse than the other. Each religion has multiple branches and can be understood and practiced in a myriad of ways. For this paper, I am more concerned with the conceptual relationships between the three Abrahamic religions—Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—and how shifting relationships between the three might serve as metaphor for reframing curriculum.

In this vein, I also explore Derrida's notion of "hospitality"—a welcoming of the "uninvited visitor"—as one possibility for inviting religious and other differences of gender, race, socio-economic status, etc. into curriculum. It is my hope that exploring these interrelationships can provide insight for a more inclusive curriculum for students and teachers of all faiths, those who do not claim a faith, and those who belong to multiple faiths simultaneously.

In constructing a framework of hospitality, I tease out some of the recurring themes in Derrida's writings and lectures on the subject. I also weave in some of my own pedagogical insights regarding the ways in which hospitality might be implicated in practice. I begin this paper by briefly examining the connection between education and religion followed by a rationale for why I chose Derrida's work on hospitality as the theoretical grounding for this paper. Next, I deconstruct the Judeo-Christian narrative as a way of recovering the Muslim third. While this section does not focus exclusively on Derrida's writings, it does allow for a rethinking of the relationship between the three Abrahamic religions, which sets the stage for his theory of hospitality. The remaining sections focus more strictly on Derrida's concept of hospitality. The themes I explored are: hospitality and the "uninvited visitor," difference as a human right, secularization, the welcoming experience, and forgiveness. I conclude with an exploration of what these concepts may mean for a curriculum of hospitality.

## Religion and Education

Other writings address more deeply the long history of the ways in which public education has grown out of religious traditions, but that is not the focus of this paper. What I am concerned with here are the relational aspects between education and religion. While there is a gloss of a separation of education and religion, at least in the American public school system, it seems obvious that such a separation is implausible from the beginning as students, teachers, curriculum designers, and administrators bring their own religious and non-religious lenses to bear in their understandings of curriculum.

My own perspective is that any attempt to divest students and teachers of their religious beliefs in the context of public education is disingenuous. When I was a child growing up in the 1970s, there was a push to remove prayer from schools. The joke among students was that anyone who didn't believe in prayer had never been at school on test day. Our religious and spiritual beliefs, jokes notwithstanding, are already there and influence our points of view in different ways. This is not a free pass for imposing one's beliefs on another through public schooling, whether those be religious, personal, social, and/or political. It is an opportunity to acknowledge one's beliefs and to utilize those beliefs to create spaces of acceptance, even for those with whom we significantly differ.

It could be argued that the relationship between religion and education can be mutually beneficial. In noting the inseparability of education and religion, Daisaku Ikeda (2007), founder of the international peace institute known as The Boston Research Center for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (BRC), argues that the “humanism that lies at the heart of all religions—is indispensable” in developing a more “humane” education (p. ix). He adds that education can help religion from becoming overly “self-righteous” and conversely that education derives its “true value” when supported by “spirituality and philosophy” (p. ix). In noting the need to explore issues of spirituality in society more broadly, Chérif (2008) adds that both avoiding spiritual matters and enforcing spirituality in a strict way out of a “fear of freedom,” serves to heighten “dehumanization” (p. 5). This suggests that the spiritual aspects of religion, when practiced thoughtfully and not imposed or mandated, can foster an educational system that embodies care for all students and that imbuing education with spirituality can also serve to re-humanize it.

At the same time there is a continual need to guard against the merging of religious and political power within institutions, including schools. Specifically, one must especially resist the authoritarian urge to pick and choose whom to welcome and whom to reject based on a veneer of religious belief. Research professor and best-selling author Brené Brown (2012) argues,

It doesn't matter if the group is a church or a gang or a sewing circle ... asking members to dislike, disown or distance themselves from any other group of people as a condition of “belonging” is always about control and power. (p. 108)

It may seem harsh to implicate both religion and education as sites of authority, power, and control. Yet it can be this same power both inside and outside of religious and educational systems that can be used to create spaces that are inclusive and support differences no matter how difficult. The idea is not to take on or accept those beliefs, but to defend others' right to be different.

## Why Derrida?

As I began to look at the way in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were connected and disconnected, I came across the writings of Jacques Derrida. In these writings, Derrida explores a theory of hospitality, often by shifting our understanding of the relationship between the three Abrahamic religions. Some of the writings that form the basis of this exploration include Derrida's (2002) *Acts of Religion*, Derrida's (2000) *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, and Chérif's (2008) *Islam & The West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. Other writings are, of course, included where noted.

Derrida's early years growing up in Algeria, as a "Franco-Maghrebin, Judeo-Arab Jew" (Chérif, 2008, p. 31) seem to have cosmically positioned him at the intersections of multiple cultural, political, linguistic, and spiritual crossroads from which much (but he notes not all) of his philosophical work derives. According to Derrida (as quoted in Chérif, 2008), it was the movement between and among different cultures that created a sort of "instability" that fed the "questions" that gave rise to the "earthquake" of his life experiences (p. 31). Given the apparent "instability" of our current times as evidenced by suggestions that democracy is "devouring itself" (Rosenberg, 2018) and may be at an end, perhaps such instability can be a generative source in striving for what Derrida (as quoted in Chérif, 2008) calls a "democracy to come ... whose occurrence and promise remain before us" (p. 42). From a Derridean perspective, one might then ask—how can democracy be at an end if it has never fully been realized?

It may be interesting to note that, in thinking through the concept of this paper with a friend, she asked why I needed to link these three religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) together. Another asked if I should be discussing religion at all in my university Curriculum Studies courses. My response was and is that we should discuss anything that teachers discuss, anything that influences teaching, learning, and the lives of both students and teachers, that it is important in education to explore difficult issues of meaning and to deconstruct language in order to develop new understandings that offer new possibilities, and that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are already always connected through shared ancestry.

## Deconstructing the Judeo-Christian Narrative

Whereas the Classical West was Judeo-Islamo-Christian and Greco-Arab, we have been led to believe that it was only Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian. The sons of Abraham fall into a trap of confrontation at the moment they must live together. (Chérif, 2008, p. 3)

As I began my research regarding the term "Judeo-Christian," I came across the above quote by Algerian intellectual Mustafa Chérif who reflects on his 2003 public debate with Jacques Derrida. The section that stands out to me in the quote above is "we have been led to believe it was only Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian." I think it is possible that many Westerners (and perhaps Easterners too) do not think of Islam as a Western religion at all, let alone as connected to Judaism and Christianity and as having "participated in the emergence of the modern Western world" (Chérif, 2008, p. 21). If we have been led to believe that the ancient western world was largely Judeo-Christian, how did this term come into usage and to what end?

One of the most powerful ways this belief has taken hold is through the usage of the term "Judeo-Christian" as a symbol of

religious and ethical consensus. The phrase commonly refers to the shared religious texts (the Ten Commandments, incorporation of the Torah into the Christian Bible), shared moral principles (the “golden rule”), and millennia of shared cultural and historical values between Christianity and Judaism. Both faiths affirm one God, prize the covenant between God and his people, and value the dignity of human life. Said to be the basis of Western civilization, the Judeo-Christian tradition invokes shared values and connected fates. (Grzymala-Busse, 2019, para. 2)

Yet, article after article I read seemed to argue that any notion of a “Judeo-Christian” tradition is somewhat of an “assumed tradition,” indeed a “myth” (Commentary Bk, 1969, para. 4 & 11). In fact, the concept itself was described variously as “bizarre, imprecise, and most-importantly dangerous” (Zagoria-Moffet, 2014, para. 1), “historically shaky” and a “modern invention” (Almond 2019, para. 10 & 24), a “construct, an artificial gloss of reason over the swarm of fideist passion” (Commentary Bk, 1969, para. 5), “vague, historically flawed, and inflammatory” (Altshuler, 2016, para. 5), and “an expedient political tactic, rather than a longstanding historical consensus” (Grzymala-Busse, 2019, para. 12) among others. These perspectives throw into question the notion of a unified consensus on the meaning and accuracy of the term.

In the introduction to the book, *Is there a Judeo-Christian Tradition?*, co-editors Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski (2016) open the book by discussing “the myth” of a Judeo-Christian tradition as understood from a European perspective. They begin with the complex and disputed history of the term in Europe and its uses through theological, philosophical, philological, and political lenses. The book itself is centered on the work of Arthur Allen Cohen who was an American scholar, theologian, and author of both fiction and non-fiction works. Specifically, the book focuses on and supports three of Cohen’s claims that the term “Judeo-Christian” was first coined by the German theological scholar F. C. Bauer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that it had a “decidedly negative usage” unlike the usage that sprung up in the U.S. during its fight against Nazism, and that the term “Judeo-Christian” is in effect “anti-Semitic” (Nathan & Topolski, 2016, p. 8–9). The editors also point to the contention that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the term “Judeo-Christian” appeared in print, the term “Semite” referred to Jews, Arabs, and Muslims, suggesting that term “anti-Semitic” applied to all three. They also suggest that the linking of Judaism and Christianity in present-day Europe has led to Islamophobia presumed because the term “Judeo-Christian” excludes Islam (Nathan & Topolski, 2016, p. 9)

In the United States, use of “Judeo-Christian” increased in popularity in the 1930s (Hartmann et al., 2005, p. 209–210). One of the recognized leading authorities in this area, Mark Silk (as quoted in Winters, 2019), offers a succinct summary of how the term has shifted since it has gained public popularity:

During the 1930s, “Judeo-Christian” came into American public discourse as a way of opposing Fascist anti-Semitism. After World War II, it became the watchword of an America standing for human freedoms against communism. With the rise of the religious right, it was transformed into a synonym for traditional sexual mores and, later, into a shibboleth for Islamophobia. (para. 15)

Reading even this admittedly reduced history—one could argue that the term has been (and is being) used at different times, in different contexts, for different purposes. It seems as if the two religions became linked in opposition against other forces at different points in time—anti-



Semitism, communism, sexual and social permissiveness, and Islam. Further, it was initially used as a term of inclusion—to encourage Christian protection of Jews in the buildup to WWII—but is increasingly used to exclude others (Almond, 2019; Altshuler, 2016).

Some have also argued that Judaism and Christianity are a strange pairing—given their very basic differences in beliefs and practices as well as the history of Christian aggression toward Jews, including blood libels, the Crusades, pogroms, expulsions, book-burnings, ghettos, restrictions on jobs and education, and the toleration of violence and prejudice directed against Jews in the name of Christian integrity (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Zagoria-Moffet, 2014). Zagoria-Moffet (2014) goes on to argue that Judaism and Islam have more similarities than do Judaism and Christianity, especially regarding “concepts about law, behavior, faith, the nature of God, the obligations of people, the running of a society, etc.” with some exceptions, of course (para. 5). Ultimately, “The myth, then, is a projection of the will to endure of both Jews and Christians, an identification of common enemies, an abandonment of millennial antagonisms in the face of threats which do not discriminate between Judaism and Christianity” (Commentary Bk, 1969, para. 20). These readings suggest not a shared tradition, but an alliance for purposes of political power in the fight against perceived enemies. But why must religions be wielded as weapons when, through their overarching spiritual aspects, they are generally intended to show the connections among all people and provide pathways to ethical relationships with others?

My goal here is not to destroy all of the linkages between Christianity and Judaism—but to look at how the meaning of the term has been constructed, changed over time, and imbued with social and political power. I also recognize the historical connections and the generative possibilities between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, all of which trace their existence to a single ancestor in the figure of Ibrahim/Abraham. Is there space to bring together these three related religions in a dynamic tension without subsuming one into the other? This does not have to be an act of political control or political correctness. Opening up the relationship amongst the three religions could inspire mutual respect, affection, care, and hospitality.

For Derrida (as quoted in Chérif, 2008) “one of the primary duties of our intellectual and philosophical memory is to rediscover that grafting, the reciprocal fertilization of the Greek, the Arab, and the Jew” (p. 39). One example of cross-fertilization mentioned by Derrida was Spain. I believe he was referring to the Iberian Peninsula, which was at one time under Muslim rule. According to the BBC (2009), Islamic Spain (711-1492) has been “described as a ‘golden age’ of religious and ethnic tolerance and interfaith harmony between Muslims, Christian, and Jews” (n.p.), although, as the BBC also notes, Jews and Christians were still considered second class citizens and were required to follow various restrictions.

Derrida’s point is that there are historical examples in which the three Abrahamic religions thrived together, and it is our curriculum task to dig those up as a way of thinking about nonviolent possibilities for the future. For example, for two years I lived in a Cameroonian village where adherents of various forms of Islam, Christianity, and Animism worked together in openly generative ways despite their differences. This could serve as an example of interfaith cross-pollination. Of course, I am not naïve. There are many instances across Africa and the world where a breakdown of tolerance, religious and otherwise, has resulted in violence. Yet, it seemed to me (though I do not speak for everyone) that most people in the village where I lived and in the surrounding area recognized each other’s differences regarding religious beliefs and their own rules of behavior. It felt easy and natural to respect each other’s beliefs because religion seemed to be simultaneously social in observance and personal in practice. It has been difficult to return to the U.S. where freedom is so freely spoken about, but the desire to control the Other through

political means (laws, funding, judicial systems, media, religion, etc.) seems an ever-present reality.

I wonder what shift in thought and relation may be possible if the interconnections and similarities among the three religions (in addition to the differences) were studied, understood, and explored in popular mass media, government institutions, and schools. Such study would not have to devolve into a contest amongst religions but could allow us to reconsider some of our deeply held beliefs. This calls for the recognition that curriculum can, and perhaps should, be both eye-opening and challenging. My hope is that in shifting the language (the language of Judeo-Islamo-Christian) a new relationship may emerge—one in which we recognize family ties and demonstrate that it is possible to work through our differences.

### Developing a Curriculum of Hospitality

...hospitality, the experience, the apprehension, the exercise of impossible hospitality, of hospitality as the possibility of impossibility (to receive another guest of whom I am incapable of welcoming, to become that which I am capable of)... (Derrida, 2002, p. 364)

If I welcome only what is welcome, what I am ready to welcome, and that I recognize in advance because I expect the coming of the *hôte* as invited, there is no hospitality. (Derrida, 2002, p. 362)

Before I begin, I would like to point out, as Derrida notes, that the French word “*hôte*” as mentioned above translates to both “host” and “guest” depending on the context. It is fascinating to imagine that we are in some sense both host and guest simultaneously. What does that mean for the relationship between guest and host? When we extend hospitality to the other, are we offering it to ourselves? When we are inhospitable, does it hurt us both?

According to Derrida, there is a big difference between being an “invited” guest and an “uninvited” guest. When a person is invited and expected, it is easy to be welcoming. Yet, it is in welcoming and making a space for the uninvited guest that one may demonstrate hospitality. This calls for going beyond the limitation of the impossible to create the possibility of hospitality. And therein lies the challenge. Welcoming the uninvited guest takes considerable effort and self-reflection. There are no shortcuts nor rules to follow, only ambiguities and ongoing negotiations between the known and unknown, the shared and unshared.

In an educational sense, it is easy to welcome the students that we expect to share commonalities with. Perhaps these are students who look like “us,” share the same language and culture as “us,” and perhaps expect to be welcomed by “us.” Following Derrida, this would not be hospitality. Hospitality would require educators and educational systems to welcome the students they are not prepared to welcome. These might include students who look different, sound different, come from another culture, speak a different language, have a different sexual orientation, have experienced trauma, etc. These might also be the parts of our own selves whose presence we may painfully neglect.

To welcome these differences would require the impossible—the things we aren’t able to do—but it is precisely because they are impossible that we must recognize and go beyond our social, cultural, political, and religious boundaries to locate possibilities within the impossible. To

do that requires embracing “the infinite” (Derrida, 2002, p. 386)—what I think of as the ultimate interconnectedness of all living things.

Derrida’s (2002) main example for hospitality appears in the personage of Ibrahim/Abraham who is the shared ancestor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and a “kind of saint of hospitality” (p. 369). Drawing on the work of the French Catholic Scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon (1883-1962), Derrida explores the story of Ibrahim/Abraham and how he was told by messianic visitors of God’s plan to destroy the “wicked” city of Sodom. Yet Ibrahim/Abraham pleads with God on behalf of the lives of those who would be lost. I should note that this story appears in a section of the both the Bible (Genesis: 22-32) and the Quran (Surah Hud 11:73-76). In a sense, Abraham/Ibrahim is negotiating with Allah/God to save the lives of those who would be lost, no matter how despicable. It seems improbable and unimaginable to preserve even the greatest of differences. Certainly, there have been other women and men who have challenged authority in some way to save the lives of others. This example draws out of my reading of Derrida and serves to support the notion that one could work within one’s own religious beliefs and still go beyond one’s religious boundaries to advocate on behalf of those who are seen as dramatically different.

In the story mentioned above, the city of Sodom was ultimately destroyed, but this should not deter us from advocating on behalf of those who may seem unworthy of our advocacy. If it is fear of the Other or how we might be perceived in our care of the Other that holds us back—let Ibrahim/Abraham’s (and others’) example help give us courage. We cannot keep only to ourselves and reject the outside world. Chérif (2008) argues,

No civilization or society can live in autarchy, in closure; and our texts not only authorize but demand the welcoming and the respect of the different other. This is why we are fundamentally attached to hospitality, to exchanges, to negotiation, to debate. (p. 78)

By opening up dialogue both for and with the Other, we learn to open up possibilities for ourselves and the differences within us.

### **Difference as a Human Right**

The logic of war and the globalization of injustice contradict the evoked principles of the rights of peoples and of human rights, the right to be different as well as the access to an authentic universality. . . . To rethink this disturbing world, in which the right to be different is less and less a given, is a necessity that cannot be ignored. (Derrida, as quoted in Chérif, 2008, p. 24)

Implicit in a curriculum of hospitality is the notion of difference and the ability to welcome difference into our lives. I often ask graduate students in my class to define the term culture. They typically speak about cultures in terms of sameness—shared foods, music, religion, language customs, etc. But I ask them, based on Derrida’s insistence that “civilization and community are not about sameness but difference” (as quoted in Chérif, 2008, p. xvii), if it is possible to be part of a culture and perhaps both share and NOT share some of those things. In other words, is it possible to be different and still be a part of a particular culture? And then, doesn’t that broaden the possibilities of what culture may be? At least one student has asserted that cultures are about



sameness and sharedness—that is, she said, how they came about. I suggested that perhaps that might be the case—at least on the surface. If it were the case that communities and cultures were built on sameness though, we would not need vast political and judicial systems to discuss and debate different perspectives. Nor would we need so many laws to protect our individual rights to be different—to have a different religion than the majority, to think differently, to speak differently, to read, write, and view different materials, and to behave differently. To view culture in this way requires being able to both locate the differences within commonalities and likewise the commonalities within the differences without one swallowing up the other.

For Derrida, difference itself is a human right that is under attack and in urgent need of defending. Further, the ways in which we deal with difference speaks to our underlying beliefs. This suggests that without differences justice would not be possible. If we were truly the same—we would have the same needs and think the same way. But humans have the ability to think one way and behave differently. It is one thing to have a belief in freedom, democracy, and social justice; it is quite another thing to behave in accordance with those ideals. Seeing how those who are perceived as different are treated by various cultural actors (educators, politicians, judges, businesspeople etc.) can be telling regarding our beliefs on social justice.

Likewise, current curriculum materials often promote the idea that sameness is preferable over difference, especially through a curriculum that focuses on standardized exams and the pursuit of the one right answer. How can we as educators invoke what Derrida calls the “right to be different” in working with students to develop their and our own differences—even though students sometimes reject this right in order to receive a socially approved “good” grade? Can curriculum also be about the pursuit of differences as well as what Derrida refers to as “access to an authentic universality” (as quoted in Chérif, 2008, p. 24), which I interpret as the right to belong to the human community AND to be different?

Becoming an advocate for curriculum difference can be a challenge. In my view, it would have to begin with educators getting in touch with and advocating for the differences within themselves. As teachers, we are good at learning systems. And, when the social/educational system says something is bad, wrong, taboo, different, many (but not all) of us learn how to suppress those parts of ourselves that are deemed socially/institutionally incongruent. Recognizing and reconnecting with those parts of ourselves takes a gentle kind of strength and intentional work that holds the power to help students make these re/connections as well.

Certainly, we should want students to have the basic skills to communicate, earn a living, and be able to participate in society. But beyond these basics, a whole universe of differences and possibilities within these “basics” also exists. Let us not teach the fear of these differences that we carry within us. Let us make peace with our differences and live more creative and connected lives. Let us internalize inclusivity for the benefit of ourselves and our students, for the ability to care for others begins with the ability to care for ourselves.

Derrida calls this learning about the Other (which I propose to be another person or another side to the self) as learning the “poetry of the other” (as quoted in Chérif, 2008, p. 81). What a lovely thought—to think of difference in terms of the poetry of the other. Not to think in terms of fear or desire to control but to find the beauty within. In this way, curriculum can be a space in which we teach for developing our differences in generative and thought-provoking ways.

## Secularization

I do not believe that secularization of the political presupposes a denial of religion. On the contrary, I believe authentic believers, if that word has meaning, are the first or should be the first, to demand separation of the political and the religious, because this is also the condition for the freedom of religion. (Derrida, 2002, pp. 72–73)

Secularization—“or the separation of the political and the religious”—appears to be another important step toward creating a more hospitable culture. Interestingly, Derrida insists that this demand for secularization should be made first and foremost by “authentic believers” whom he describes as “those who are truly living their religious beliefs and not simply endorsing the dogma of those religions” because he believes they “are more ready to understand the religion of the other and to accede to that faith” as a kind of “universal faith” (as quoted in Chérif, 2008, p. 58). The idea is that authentic believers recognize religion as a type of universal human connection. They also see the need to protect everyone’s religious freedoms, not simply their own politically bounded interests. Failing to protect each other’s freedoms turns religions into rivals bent on power and control. It is in this vein that Smith-Christopher (2007) also argues for “radical faith *and* political atheism” (emphasis in original), which he describes as a “faith that embraces ... nonviolence” and “to proclaim oneself an atheist in relation to the preferred gods of nationalism and patriotism” (p. 174). In short, he suggests that citizens not put their faith in political systems that turn religion into a tool for social and cultural division. Pitting religious beliefs against each other in the political arena has the potential to lead to ongoing social and cultural upheaval.

Through my travels in various cultures, I have experienced secularized religious cultures that allowed everyday citizens to flourish. This did not mean that people did not share, discuss, challenge, and question each other’s different beliefs, but beneath it all was an underlying respect and sense of inclusion. I have also lived and worked in cultures in which democratic ideals were promoted, yet the control of the different Other was employed with religious fervor and morality both within and outside of religious institutions. According to Chérif’s (2008) reading of Derrida,

even nonreligious institutions tend to impose their norms and standards from the top down, according to a model of absolute authority shared by the three religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If this is true, which Derrida believes it is, the liberating duty of deconstruction entails a commitment to secularization ... assumed as the interminable effort to dismantle the theocratic model of institutional authority, which coincides with the demand for unconditional submission. (p. xii)

This is my concern for American public education. That while it is considered a nonreligious institution, it can and sometimes does impose a “theocratic model of institutional authority” that demands the “unconditional submission” of students and teachers. Once such a theocratic model of authority is instilled both within people and within institutions, challenging the system to make space for differences can seem like an abandonment of religious duty. And yet, perhaps paradoxically, a careful deconstructive reading of religious texts can provide openings for challenging the same authority that religions themselves seem to engender. In essence, the religious texts referenced in this paper simultaneously provide guidelines and wisdom for living non-violently in relation to others, but they also push us to think and act beyond what we are able to do.

### The Welcoming Experience

It is hard to imagine a scene of hospitality during which one welcomes [accueille] without smiling at the other, without giving a sign of joy or pleasure, without smiling at the other as at the welcoming of a promise ... even if the smile is interior and discreet, and even if it is mixed with tears which cry of joy. (Derrida, 2002, p. 359)

Here Derrida asks us to welcome the Other with a smile, with joy, with pleasure. While it is one thing to tolerate differences, welcoming the Other—the uninvited visitor—with a smile whether physically and/or metaphorically, with pleasure, and with cries of joy is another. How might we convey to the uninvited Other that, You are welcome here! We see your humanity! We celebrate you! We hope you are happy here! We will be sad to see you go! This seems a lot to ask of someone when they are confronted with a person or idea they may or may not want to know.

What is also interesting is Derrida's concept of smiling "as at the welcoming of a promise." In the context of the quote, I think it means a kind of relishing, a wanting, an obligation, an invitation to the joy of caring for another. Taking responsibility for another can be understandably burdensome, painful even, but there is a kind of beauty in making an ethical commitment to give safe passage to another. It can also be a healing of oneself for in recognizing the humanness of the other, we make room for ourselves.

Reflecting further, I began to think about the welcoming smile—and the lack thereof—when encountering the uninvited guest. When I was younger, I served as an International Student Advisor at a local community college. A few students over the years asked me why Americans made "that face" when they tried to talk to them. In a shock of recognition, I knew what they meant by "that face" because I had made "that face" early in my career. I was so intent on trying to figure out what the student needed, what they were trying to say, and which regulation applied to their circumstance that I had forgotten to notice the humanity within. Their presence was often met with my furrowed brow. I had to teach myself to soften, to slow down, to project my sincere excitement at receiving them, and to put our humanness before any work that needed doing. One might call this practicing mindfulness on the way toward inner and outer hospitality.

More recently, I witnessed some examples of "that face" as I introduced an international visiting scholar in various offices around our campus. While some people radiated warmth and welcome through their tone and posture, others barely noted the scholar's existence. They seemed so focused on the scholar's paperwork, they barely looked up from their desks and computer screens. Certainly, this was not the case in every instance—but when it did occur, my heart sank. I felt sad that the "community" I was a part of and represented did not live up the promise of a smile. I even apologized at one point, and the scholar graciously acknowledged that they knew everyone was busy. This is not a rebuke but an awareness to ponder.

Certainly, these experiences speak of asymmetrical relationships of power. Power can both be used to welcome and to protect the "uninvited visitor" as much as it can also be used to segregate and punish differences. As a former Middle School teacher, I tried to use the twinge that I felt when an unwanted visitor showed up unannounced as a signal to embrace the Other in some way. I tried to quiet the urge to subtly and/or overtly separate myself from the Other out of anger and resentment. This does not mean taking an "anything goes" approach to classes and/or failing to engage students in critical dialogue. Nor is it a call to relinquish all power. It is a questioning if it is possible to smile, even under the most the most trying circumstances—to say, "I'm glad you're here" and to mean it.

## Forgiveness

Whoever asks for hospitality, asks, in a way, for forgiveness and whoever offers hospitality, grants forgiveness—and forgiveness must be infinite or it is nothing: it is excuse or exchange. (Derrida, 2002, p. 380)

I must admit that when I think of hospitality I do not immediately think of forgiveness. But here I believe Derrida recognizes that hospitality—as extended to the “uninvited visitor”—is not easy and can be a great imposition. Derrida (2002) even describes hospitality as “*to be ready to not be ready* ... to be surprised in a fashion almost violent ... to let oneself be swept by the coming of the wholly other” (p. 361, emphasis in original). In these terms, it makes sense that one must forgive the surprising arrival on the doorstep. At the same time, Derrida (2002) also argues that the host must ask the visitor for forgiveness as well because “one is always failing, lacking hospitality ... one never gives enough” and is “always inadequate” (p. 380). For anyone who has ever hosted others or who has been hosted themselves, the desire to give as much as possible for each other’s comfort while attempting not to be a bother can be all-consuming.

While I did not initially realize it as such, asking for and granting forgiveness, are healing elements within an apparatus of hospitality. As with hospitality itself, Derrida argues that forgiveness must involve forgiving not that which is easy to forgive, but the unforgivable. This can ultimately prove unfulfilling. Yet, without forgiveness, it is difficult to imagine a way forward. So, while it is difficult to embrace the needs and the disruptions of the uninvited visitor, working through those disruptions can lead to greater understanding and acceptance.

An excellent example of this concept is explored in the book, *No Future without Forgiveness*, by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) who was tasked to lead South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee. The goal of the committee was to acknowledge and address the long history of unimaginable violence inflicted on its black and brown citizenry perpetrated by whites through a national system of segregation and discrimination known as apartheid. Part of this work involved listening to the innumerable horrors that victims and their families endured. It also involved allowing perpetrators, after meeting certain criteria, to confess their crimes and, in return, they were granted immunity from prosecution. The focus was on healing rather than retribution and embracing the past to make a path forward in the spirit of forgiveness no matter how painful that may be.

I felt that the book was so compelling in its message of acknowledging the damage done, and likewise finding some measure of forgiveness held the potential for healing, that the students in my class would be equally inspired. A student in the class burst into tears at the mention of the word “forgiveness.” She explained that she was a survivor of abuse who was continually asked to forgive the perpetrator. I was not prepared for this response. For me forgiveness suggested releasing anger for one’s own health and welfare. My assumption was not necessarily right or wrong, but I was not ready to not be ready. How could I respond to the student without making things worse? Could I forgive myself for not being ready? How could I prepare myself to be ready to not be ready next time?

This also reminded me of a time when I critiqued the creative work of a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student. I commented on practically every part of their work. When the student, out of frustration, snapped at me that my remarks were too much, too cutting, I instantly recognized that he was right! I had focused on the work and had forgotten the child. I apologized for my words. I asked for

forgiveness. The student mentioned that it was “so weird” because “teachers never apologize.” This had the ring of “truth.”

### Notes on a Hospitable Curriculum

Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female. (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, p. 77, Emphasis in original)

Maintaining boundaries is not necessarily a bad thing. Yes, boundaries can be used to exclude, but they can also lead to openness and an acceptance of others who differ significantly. I think of the quote above as a sort of Hippocratic Oath for educators although I would replace each “or” with an “and” for greater inclusivity. In saying “yes to who [and] what turns up, before any determination,” we might set boundaries that unconditionally welcome and protect differences in curriculum, even those differences that we perceive as discomforting, limiting, and exclusionary. This is not a call to accept physical or emotional violence. Nor is it a call to avoid addressing the intentional and unintentional marginalization that occurs in schools and society. It is a request for educators to think about the relationships with and among students, how we might perpetuate our own forms of marginalization, and to consider how a curriculum of hospitality might shift those relationships for the better.

For instance, as a student, I recall teachers/faculty who demonstrated a welcoming and celebration of differences, no matter how painful or how much they disagreed with students’ perspectives. Differences, even religious viewpoints that seemed exclusionary, were necessary for a wholistic understanding of the world around us. I left those classes feeling that neither I nor my classmates had been judged for our differing views—even though I internally professed my own desire to dismiss others’ perspectives as wrong and uninformed.

I have also attended classes in which I noted that the teacher was displeased with viewpoints that differed from his or her own viewpoint. In looking back, I can recognize times in which teachers had subtly and overtly distanced themselves from those students with diverging viewpoints. I learned what to say to get a good grade and to feel somehow morally superior. I don’t think I was alone in this. I asked my 7<sup>th</sup> grade students if it were better to say/do what the teacher expected in order to get a good grade or do things in the ways that were meaningful to them. All but one or two students argued that it was better to please the teacher because it was more important to get good grades. The point being that students learn what we want by observing our behavior and then often play to our desires. They learn which of their classmates are “good” and “bad.” The grades and awards they are given provide them a sense of who is better than whom.

I have been the teacher who has been in/hospitable when “uninvited visitors” (differences) have shown up in my classrooms. Recognizing this, I try to develop my own embodiment of the smile that welcomes unconditionally, conveys they will be given safe harbor, that I will ask forgiveness for not doing enough, and that I will miss them when they are not there. We are both host and uninvited guest at the same time, and in welcoming the other, I am welcoming myself. Such a perspective can be healing for us both.



## In Conclusion

When hospitality takes place, the impossible becomes possible but *as impossible*.  
(Derrida, 2002, p. 387)

The premise for this paper has been that students' and teachers' religious identities are implicated within curriculum. These religious identities can make their appearance in the classroom in sometimes surprising ways. Further these identities, based on religion, can create boundaries that exclude others. It is my contention though that many if not all religions offer mandates for holding fast to one's religious boundaries while providing a means for crossing those boundaries to ethically engage others. Additionally, preserving and crossing religious and other boundaries can be an impossibly possible task.

I also suggest that Derrida's conceptualization of hospitality offers opportunities for rethinking our relationships with the "uninvited visitor," which I define as other people and the othered parts of the self. As such, I have offered a theoretical framework of hospitality based on Derrida's work that may be useful in shaping our relationships within curriculum in mutually satisfying ways. This framework includes concepts of difference as a human right, secularization, the welcoming experience, and forgiveness. Further, I have shifted the relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as an example of how religions can maintain their differences and yet be open to each other through the lens of hospitality.

Lastly, I have woven in my own experiences of hospitality and inhospitality within and outside the classroom. I was surprised and often dismayed by students' claiming of religious beliefs that I perceived as opposed to notions of equity, justice, and the teachings of their own religions. I now recognize my own inhospitality in failing to happily welcome these and other differences—even those I find shocking—despite my own hopes of teaching in a more inclusive way. It is my hope that the concepts and experiences explored here might resonate with other educators so that curriculum might be conceived in a spirit of hospitality. You are, of course, free to disagree. I will be happy if you do.

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