

BUILDING ABRAHAMIC PARTNERSHIPS:
A MODEL INTERFAITH PROGRAM AT HARTFORD SEMINARY

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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 (*BAP I*), 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, since 2007 an advanced-level leadership training (*BAP II*, primarily for veterans of the basic course) has been offered in the summer. I have served as *BAP* program director since its inception, as 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.¹

In this paper I describe briefly the elements of the advanced *BAP* training and the skills needed for professional interfaith leadership. But my primary focus is the basic *BAP*

¹ 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.

course, which (as of this writing, in July, 2009) has been offered eleven times.² This reflection is a preliminary assessment of its effectiveness as a model for adult-level interfaith education. The course is still evolving, partly in response to participants' evaluations and accounts of their experiences.³

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, as it deepened the school's commitment to, and capacity for, interfaith study and conversation. That conversation was broadened from a bilateral dialogue to an Abrahamic triad, while retaining the specialized focus on Christian-Muslim relations. My role as *BAP* Director also reflects 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 *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.⁴ For over twenty years I also taught Jewish tradition and spirituality at several Christian institutes and ecumenical centers in Israel.

² The full course syllabus, which is appended, provides an overview of the content and character of the experience.

³ A systematic evaluation of the *BAP* program is being undertaken this summer (2009), using e-mail questionnaires and selective phone interviews with past participants.

⁴ For information on *OZ veSHALOM-NETIVOT SHALOM*, see www.netivot-shalom.org.il; for information on *OPEN HOUSE*, see 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, accessible through www.usip.org

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—a generally liberal and tolerant region—making it accessible to students along the east coast, from Washington, D.C., to Maine. Some of the almost 300 participants in the eleven basic *BAP* courses conducted so far have come from more distant places, including Alabama, Colorado, Wyoming, California, western Canada, the Netherlands, Israel, Syria, Turkey, Iran, 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 (degree candidates and auditors) from all three traditions relatively easily. In addition, there are scores of American and international Muslim students in the Seminary's degree programs and its unique Islamic Chaplaincy program.

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 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 more 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.⁵ Another problematic issue is raised by Prof. Ingrid Mattson, my Hartford Seminary and *BAP* colleague who is currently serving as 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.

⁵ 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.⁶ The lack of other such initiatives, almost eight 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.⁷ 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.⁸

⁶ 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 (see p. 4 of that report).

⁷ 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.

⁸ David Smock, "Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear: An Abrahamic Dialogue," *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 basic *BAP* course. 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.⁹ 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 ego-based and 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, *BAP* is their first opportunity to engage Muslims and experience prayer in a mosque. For most of the Muslim participants, it is their first encounter with Jews and the inside of a synagogue. Such face-to-face encounters, and the crossing of experiential thresholds, demand a level of openness and vulnerability which few people have the courage to risk.¹⁰ Those who rise to the challenge may 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

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ One of the reasons the course includes several shared *kosher/halal* meals, starting with an opening dinner, is to create a gastronomic and cultural "comfort zone" for mutual engagement.

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.

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 basic course is only the first step on a lifelong journey toward deeper understanding and, ultimately, spiritual fraternity and solidarity. The four stated goals of that course 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 have assembled a teaching staff for each round of the basic course comprised of five or six Hartford Seminary faculty members¹¹ and three “pastoral adjuncts,” clergy from each of the traditions with experience leading local congregations. The Seminary professors other than myself 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

¹¹To ensure that the Seminary as a whole has a stake in the *BAP* program and that its varied resources are tapped for the benefit of the participants, the faculty members who teach in the basic course represent all three of the school’s centers: the Center for Faith in Practice, the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, and the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

can provide a potentially rich learning opportunity for that individual and the whole group. Each *BAP* round has ample opportunities for turning irritation into insight, 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 ten ground rules for respectful dialogue, as opposed to debate, is read aloud and adopted, sometimes with an addition or amendment. (The one-page list of ground rules is appended). When necessary, these ground rules are reiterated during the course to bring the group back to its agreed-upon norms for communicating;

(2) When someone hears a statement that disturbs 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!” The late Krister Stendahl, my Christian mentor and friend, called this “holy envy,” and he considered 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 *BAP* course is about 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 or an approved artistic project with rationale and bibliography; and a personal journal recording the student's insights and feelings during the week.¹² The academic element of the program consists of:

- 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, what the Trinity means to Christians, or what *jihad* means to Muslims;
- two evening sessions devoted to specific subjects: on the second (Monday) evening, we address “What Do We Mean by Spirituality?” with interfaith triads sharing accounts of personal religious experiences before three clergy adjuncts offer their reflections; and on the third (Tuesday) evening we explore the topic “Religion and the Media,” with professional journalists from the newspaper and television industries sharing examples of their work;
- three half days of comparative text study, in four small groups and then 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

¹² 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 interactions outside the classroom, impacts the students.

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 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;¹³
- in addition to seven *kosher/halal* meals eaten together, long lunch and dinner breaks to encourage fellowship and networking--many participants have reported that these

¹³ 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, one of two creative and fun exercises is used to achieve closure to the week-long experience: (1) in one exercise, 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*. (These were created by Artists for Middle East Peace in Lexington, MA). Most participants use colored markers to draw their visions of interreligious peace. Others make collages out of colored paper. Then the group members share their creations in turn, while sitting in a circle, after which they all walk around the circle in silence, looking closely at each of the artistic visions placed on the chairs; (2) the alternative exercise has the group divide into three Jewish-Christian-Muslim construction teams. Each team is given a box of Legos and is asked to design together a sacred space/environment in which all feels welcome and included. The process of “negotiation” and mutual accommodation, over symbols and spatial configurations, yields rich learning opportunities. After all three group have finished, each shares its design and something of the group dynamics that went into constructing it.

unprogrammed mealtimes are a rich and essential part of the course, allowing them to cross boundaries, overcome fears and prejudices, and forge new friendships;

- in recent rounds of *BAP I*, a four-part “fishbowl” exercise¹⁴ focusing on Israel/Palestine and extending over three days, as a way to practice compassionate listening around one of the most controversial and polarizing topics in Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations; at the end of each afternoon session on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, members of one faith group sit in an inner circle and speak in turn (for 3 minutes each) on what the events in the Holy Land mean to them, while members of the other two faith groups form an outer circle, listening without commenting; on Thursday, most of the evening session is devoted to processing these “fishbowl” experiences; also, those who are journaling during the week have an opportunity to record their reactions along the way.¹⁵

Over eleven 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, and Sabbath observance is one such practice.

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 difference between the teachings of Islam and the different cultural manifestations

¹⁴ See Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright, *The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics: Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot*, Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006, pp. 54-55.

¹⁵ See the appendix on the “fishbowl” exercise and the insights drawn from the June, 2009, rounds of *BAP I* and *BAP II*.

(including distortions of that 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. 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 has (alas) essentially ignored Jesus.

On the day allotted to Christianity, Prof. Ian Markham¹⁶ has begun 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 then asks the Christians to raise their hands if they believe in God. All the Christians raise their hands. Then he goes down the list, and hands drop as the different Christian doctrines 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

¹⁶ The Very Rev. Ian Markham is the former dean of Hartford Seminary. He is currently president and dean of Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA.

concerns surface again when we study texts in all three traditions on Thursday and Friday.

Understandably, the “fishbowl” exercises on Israel/Palestine are emotionally charged; but this technique allows participants to address the issue, and the feelings evoked by it, in safe, *instructive*, and *constructive* ways. Ideological polarization, even long-held grievances and recrimination, can be supplanted by empathy, alternative angles of perception on a painful subject, and envisioning strategies for healing the personal and collective wounds engendered by the tragedy in the Holy Land.¹⁷

¹⁷In the early rounds of *BAP I*, before we incorporated the “fishbowls,” Imam Yahya Hendi (Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University and an M.A. graduate of Hartford Seminary) was the Muslim pastoral adjunct. The example of a Palestinian-American imam and an Israeli-American professor overcoming enmity and embracing one another in mutual affection served, in its own way, to model a path toward reconciliation. See Yehezkel Landau and Yahya Hendi, “Jews, Muslims, and Peace,” in *Current Dialogue*, Vol. 41, June-July 2003, Geneva: World Council of Churches, pp. 12-13. In case the reader thinks that the *BAP* “laboratory” has produced some wonder drug to cure the pathological fallout from the Middle East, it is worth citing some sobering reminders of what the “real world” is like. In the June, 2007, round of *BAP I*, a painful but educationally powerful incident occurred in my modern Orthodox synagogue in West Hartford, following *Shabbat* 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 that hurt the Muslim students (including four women from Damascus, Syria, studying at Hartford Seminary) and that shattered the “safe” learning environment we had been creating all 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 challenge me, however, to engage more deliberately in *intrafaith* work, especially with my rabbi, before subsequent *BAP* groups were brought to that synagogue. A similar incident, in reverse, happened this past June (2009) in the local mosque, where the hosts invited a Palestinian-American speaker to present a partisan viewpoint on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the lunch that followed mid-day prayers there. Once again the group felt that its “safe” space, and the consensual ground rules governing our conversations, were violated. What both incidents demonstrate is the necessity to sensitize host communities before *BAP* groups are brought to their places of worship for discussion. Until this is done (and so long as the Middle East remains a source of bitter feelings), it is probably better for the group to attend the respective weekly prayers and then move to a neutral venue (like the Seminary) for the shared meals and the discussions about the experiences of communal prayer.

IV. Holistic Interfaith Engagement

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 each morning and afternoon session, 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 about 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 in the group) and share the same-gender piety in the women’s section. Here is a poem written by a U.C.C. pastor, Rev. Laura Westby, following her experience at the mosque:

Hair covered
Forehead to the floor
There I found You, at last

Nose to the carpet
Smelling fibers and feet
There I inhaled the Blessedness

Eyes closed
I was at last blind to all
But Your Presence

Bowing and bending I danced the holy round
Foreign words in my ears
You spoke silence

In this alien place
Where I was guest
I knew You, the One I have been seeking

The One who found me
On the floor of a mosque
And called me beloved.

Through their first-ever experience at a synagogue, whether modern Orthodox or liberal, Muslims develop a deeper appreciation of how Jewish tradition and the Hebrew language are very close to Islam and Arabic. Heba Youssef, a Muslim woman in the January, 2009, round of *BAP I* and a student at Hartford Seminary, attended *Shabbat* morning prayers at my modern Orthodox synagogue and wrote about the experience in her journal:

I enjoyed just observing the people and how the young ones were playing around with each other, how the older ones were more focused, how everyone was dressed and also all the rituals that took place. The ceremony of removing the Torah from its safeguarded spot; the bowing, the chanting and the designation of specific duties were all pretty fascinating to me.

We mingled a little afterwards with some of the people there and I met this nice young Jewish couple who had just recently gotten married. It was nice because they were about my age and we were discussing kosher spots in the area (because for Muslims kosher = halal) and we had a great conversation about how hard it is to find decent places for us to eat! It's nice to see how much people of faith actually have in common.

And a Catholic participant in another round of the course 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 it 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, a hymn, or a 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.¹⁸ 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 moment in 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.

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

¹⁸ See my “Foreword” to Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, *The Synoptic Gospels Set Free: Preaching without Anti-Judaism*, New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009, pp. ix-xii; and my essay “Pope John Paul II’s Holy Land Pilgrimage: A Jewish Appraisal,” in *John Paul II in the Holy Land: In His Own Words*, Lawrence Boadt, CSP, and Kevin di Camillo, eds., New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005, pp. 129-156.

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 *kosher/halal* meals that are eaten together 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.¹⁹ 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

¹⁹ On the last day of *BAP II*, the advanced training, participants experience both kinds of worship: single-faith liturgies and inclusive devotions, both designed by participants in the course. 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.

when the U.C.C. church we attended gave its blessing to same-sex relationships through some hymns included in the worship. 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, 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 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 a nearby park).

One experience in the second round of *BAP I* is worth noting (especially since it is, until now, unique). 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 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 its advantages and limitations—also need to be considered. At Hartford Seminary, 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 colleagues and I are 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 Muslims and Jews. This sensitivity serves to make the ambiance at Hartford Seminary more inclusive for *BAP* participants, especially non-Christians. 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, Hartford Seminary now sees, as one of its central goals, the promotion of 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 or chapel, 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.

One final observation regarding the composition of the *BAP* teaching staff and the participants: by restricting these courses to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the wisdom of other faith traditions (including those of the Far East) is not being tapped, even though passing references may be made to them. This is an obvious limitation and, I would add, a loss. (My own conviction is that adherents of the Abrahamic religions, which originated in the Middle East, need to develop greater humility and compassion, qualities associated more with the traditions of the Farther East). At the same time, there is a commonality of worldview and self-understanding that Jews, Christians, and Muslims share—including belief in God’s oneness, a reverence for sacred texts, and values grounded in a common prophetic heritage—that would be lost, or at least diluted, if the triad were expanded to a larger multi-faith purview.

VI. The Advanced BAP Training

After examining the challenges and achievements of *BAP I*, I want to offer some brief reflections on the advanced *BAP II* training, which Hartford Seminary has so far offered three times within its Summer session (2007, 2008, and 2009—see the appended syllabus from the most recent round). Like the basic course, *BAP II* begins with a dinner on Sunday evening, allowing the participants—most of whom took part in *BAP I*—to introduce themselves and enjoy an initial experience of fellowship. The rest of the course runs from Monday morning until Friday evening. The primary goal, which shapes the content of the course, is to help participants develop conceptual frameworks and practical skills or tools for interfaith leadership. The second major goal, a process objective as in *BAP I*, is 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, all contribute to the success of this course.

Rev. Karen Nell Smith and Imam Abdullah Antepli (both participants in *BAP I*), have served as my co-facilitators for all three rounds of *BAP II*. The theoretical and skill areas we focus on are:

1. facilitating interfaith activities (events, dialogue groups, and workshops)
2. compassionate listening and nonbelligerent communication²⁰
3. understanding group dynamics and multiple identities in interfaith settings²¹

²⁰ Gail Syring and Jan Bennett, who are trained in the “Nonviolent Communication” methodology of Marshall Rosenberg, lead this session on Tuesday morning.

²¹ Tamar Miller, trained in social work and public administration, conducts this Tuesday afternoon session

4. healing personal and collective trauma²²
5. comparative study of sacred texts from the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an²³
6. spiritual resources for conflict transformation, and
7. designing interfaith worship experiences

We have chosen five symbolic themes with universal resonance for the devotional offerings that begin each day: *light/fire; water; earth/soil; tree; and bread-and-table*. The opening dinner features an exercise in which everyone shares an object that has some personal symbolic meaning, as a means of self-introduction. Each participant places his or her object on a table in the center of the room, which has on it beforehand a candle and copies of the three sacred scriptures—this table is the central point of reference and reverence for the whole week. The candle is lit at the start of every morning, afternoon, and (one) evening session. These and other ritual elements lend the course a sacramental dimension, making it more than a strictly academic program. They also provide some spiritual coherence to the disparate experiences throughout the week.

Guest trainers share their theoretical and practical expertise on two of the five days (see footnotes 20-23). On the other three days, the various sessions are led by one or another of the three co-facilitators, while the other two serve as supportive allies, ready to intervene when called for and scribing for one another on large post-it sheets which are

²² Tamar Miller also leads this session, which we included for the first time in the 2007 round of *BAP II*

²³ In 2007 and 2008, Prof. Raquel Ukeles facilitated this Wednesday session; in 2009 Prof. Mahmoud Ayoub from Hartford Seminary and Rabbi Or Rose from Hebrew College teamed up to lead this day-long examination of Biblical and Qur'anic texts, focusing on the experience and role of prophecy in our respective traditions

then affixed to the classroom walls. Karen Nell, Abdullah, and I model distinct pedagogical styles or modes, letting the group know when we are shifting from one to the other. In the mode of **training** or **instruction**, one of us presents the rationale and concrete “hows” of a particular methodology. The second mode, which we use more often, is **elicitive facilitation**, framing a subject and then drawing forth from the group its collective wisdom.

Friday is devoted to the practicalities of designing interfaith worship. This challenge is deliberately scheduled on the last day of the course, to allow trust and familiarity to develop beforehand. There is also a very practical concern reflected in this choice: early in the week, the group is divided into two Jewish-Christian-Muslim teams of “liturgists,” so that they have ample time (during breaks and evenings) to design the two interfaith worship experiences. The day’s program moves back and forth between single-faith prayers (in each of the three traditions) and the two inclusive worship opportunities. Group discussions are conducted following each of these devotions, which can include prayer, readings from texts, song or chant, sounds from sacred instruments—drums, bells, chimes, or a *shofar* (ram’s horn)—silence, and body movement.

Prayer is a very personal act of faith, even when done in a communal setting; so talking about it, let alone planning it, with others from a different tradition (or another branch of your own), can raise sensitive issues that are often not addressed in interfaith encounters. In the 2007 round, a Christian participant asked the Jews how they feel when Christians adopt Jewish prayers like the “*Sh’ma Yisrael*” affirmation of God’s Oneness. A rich discussion about the asymmetrical relationship between Judaism and Christianity, along

with the dangers of “spiritual plagiarism,” ensued. In these honest conversations, Jews have an opportunity to share their fears and negative reactions when encountering a cross or other symbols in a church. We also address the sense of self-negation or inauthenticity that Christians often feel when asked to give up Christological language in order to accommodate Jews and Muslims in common worship. Should they ever comply, and, if so, on what occasions?

In all three rounds of *BAP II*, the interfaith worship services have been truly inspirational and a memorable highlight of each course. They demonstrate how closely connected the participants are by the end of their week together. The process of accommodating different theologies and liturgical styles, and the opportunity to present the fruits of creative collaboration to the rest of the group, yield spiritual gifts that are genuine blessings for everyone.

Evaluation forms indicate that the students in *BAP II* take from the course a set of concepts, skills, and sensitivities that can empower them both personally and professionally. Their interfaith leadership “tool kits” are enhanced, and the practical lessons can be applied in their particular work settings.

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, theologically valid vs. heretical, 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.” Long-

standing conflicts over land, power, or economic resources have been, all too often, “theologized” into cosmic struggles between God and Satan, Virtue and Evil, or the forces of Light and Darkness. In this way our religious identities have been skewed by simplistic and essentialistic thinking, along with emotional investments in self-referencing understandings of love and loyalty. *BAP* encourages participants, in a relatively “safe” setting, to undertake transformations in both spheres, 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 or partners 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—what may be termed “paradigm shifts.” We need new understandings of 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. This may be one helpful paradigm of inclusiveness and mutuality; there are many others worth exploring. We need to experiment with new ways of doing theology together, new ways of living together, and new ways of integrating the two. Familiar spiritual practices like prayer and text study can be transformed through interreligious engagement and creativity. 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. *BAP* is one step on a journey toward that shared blessing. Its theological underpinning, which I would call "pluralistic, multi-covenantal monotheism," together with a holistic pedagogy that integrates the cognitive, the affective, the aesthetic, and the spiritual dimensions of religion, together create an educational model that, I believe, could be replicated or adapted in other seminary settings.

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.²⁴ Instead of envisioning a

²⁴For a helpful way of conceiving the process of interreligious transformation, in the service of inclusive justice and reconciliation, see John Paul Lederach's *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Lederach argues (especially in pp. 31-40) that peacebuilding is both a skill and an art requiring "moral imagination" in four distinct "disciplines": (1) adversaries need to "imagine themselves in [a positive] relationship" by "taking personal responsibility and acknowledging relational mutuality"; (2) parties in conflict need to "embrace complexity" and adopt a stance of "paradoxical curiosity" in order to rise above dualistic antagonism and, instead, "hold together

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, at the same time, the oneness of God and a plurality of ways to worship and serve God. We also need new models of religious and interreligious education. And 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 mutually enriching. 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 *information*. More important, and urgently needed, 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 *transformation* that Adam and Eve shared after leaving the Garden and its childlike innocence.²⁵ 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.

seemingly contradictory social energies in a greater whole”; (3) space needs to be provided “for the creative act to emerge” and allow the estranged adversaries to “move beyond the narrow parameters of what is commonly accepted and perceived”; and (4) to move beyond enmity and violence (what is known) to the prospect of peaceful relations (the unknown and mysterious) requires a capacity to take risks “without any guarantee of success or even safety.” Lederach deepens the last point by connecting “the deeper implications of risk and the longer-term sustenance of vocation.” The vocation of interreligious peacemaking requires these different “disciplines,” or leaps of faith-imagination, in the areas of theology, spirituality, and ethics.

²⁵ For examples of such transformation of the heart, see Yossi Klein Halevi, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, *op. cit.* (fn. 19), and Donald Nicholl, *The Testing of Hearts: A Pilgrim's Journey*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998.

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

In summary, the pedagogical praxis modeled in the BAP program aims for a redemptive transformation of Abrahamic relationships by *expanding knowledge* about each other's faith traditions, *evoking and healing legacies of pain* within a safe and supportive learning environment, and *building a spiritual community* in which everyone is nourished and blessed. I am grateful to all of my colleagues—teachers and students—who have joined in this pioneering effort to explore an interior terrain linking mind, heart, and spirit. We engage in this undertaking with the hope of becoming better interfaith leaders and peacemakers in the wider society.