More and more Americans have friends and professional colleagues who practice a religion other than Christianity. School children are invited by their friends to attend both first Communions and bar mitzvahs. Gone, for the most part, are Catholic neighborhoods and religious ghettos. Jewish and Christian colleagues — one that tries not only to penetrate the worlds of Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, but to throw bridges from those worlds to the reader’s world.”

In recent decades it became a trend in academic culture to propose that religious anthropology and sociology could reduce religious diversity to a generic phenomenology composed of common elements underlying all religious traditions. One such textbook outlined its approach as: 1) gathering religious data, 2) searching for patterns, 3) analyzing the structure of patterns and 4) suggesting generalizations. Using these generalizations, textbooks were then arranged by themes such as “Ritual,” “Community,” “The Nature of the Sacred,” “Sacred Language” and “Salvation.”

As Catholic theologians lived with this approach, it became obvious to many that it needed to be abandoned. Although there are similar religious traditions, understanding diversity is
Christians brought back spices and cloth from the East. They copied the glories of Muslim architecture. They were impressed by the Muslim call to prayer. It was through dialogue with Muslim scholarship, whose culture had preserved the writings of Aristotle, that Thomas Aquinas and others acquired the philosophical tools necessary to introduce theology as a science proper to the university. In medieval universities, Muslim and Christian theologians debated the merits of their respective theologies in public forums. Interreligious dialogue is traditionally rooted in the university — it is not something new.

There are biblical roots for interreligious dialogue. The verbal attacks uttered by some Christians against certain synagogue leaders resulted in the stoning of Stephen and the expulsion of Gentile Christians from Jerusalem (Acts 6:8-8:1). As a result of this attempted but failed interaction, the concept of Trinity — Father (Unbegotten), Son (Begotten) and Holy Spirit (Proceeding), united in nature as God from all eternity — as is expressed in the Christian creeds, was the product of interreligious dialogue. Jews could not understand how Christians could claim to worship one God when, in fact, they seemed to pray to both God and to Jesus. Greeks, who through their mythologies knew only too well the price human beings pay when the gods suffer, found it difficult to understand that God would not only assume corruptible flesh, but would suffer and die. Christians, who lived among Jews and Greeks, needed to explain themselves. As a result of this interreligious exchange, the Christian creeds were born.

Interreligious dialogue has changed Christian culture in other ways. Although the Crusades did not for the most part fulfill their political objectives, they did serve to make the Christian worldview larger and more diverse. As a result of this interreligious exchange, the Christian creeds were born.

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The project of “translation,” as Huston Smith suggested, cannot be abandoned. In other words, when examined, religious traditions do have some similar tendencies, but definitions of “God,” “person,” “good and evil” inclusive enough to include all the major religious traditions become so generic and so unwieldy in a phenomenological approach that they satisfy no one. To understand and carry on dialogue with one another, we cannot simplistically work with generalizations that bypass the real differences inherent within cultures.

**Toward a Theology of Diversity**

Although crucial for interaction with the modern world, interreligious dialogue is not new to Christianity. In fact, one might say that Christianity as we know it today is a product of interreligious dialogue. The concept of
Children will most likely communicate according to the interests, development and abilities of each. If human beings understand this essential aspect of effective communication, certainly God considers the maturity, sensibilities and abilities of particular cultures when communicating with them.

Communication is received and interpreted according to ability. A teacher lectures, but a particular student might understand something entirely different than what was communicated. If we can imagine, as the Old Testament insists, that “I will be their God, and they shall be my people,” is the deepest desire of God’s heart, then we must imagine that God throughout history has and continues to reveal God’s self as people and cultures are capable of understanding. In other words, God, in mercy, self-limits God’s self in order that human beings might be able to understand something of God.

I remember as a child drinking lemonade with my grandma and grandpa on the farm porch. Grandpa told me a story about his youth, and I remember my German grandmother saying, “Auch, Pa, I didn’t know that about you!” I remember being shocked that there were still things after 60 years of marriage and working together on the farm that my grandmother did not know about my grandfather. My grandfather was an extroverted and jovial man who easily shared himself with my grandmother and whomever he might be willing to share a beer with him! Yet, the depth of his mystery was still capable of surprising my grandmother even after 60 years. People, and certainly God, cannot be confined to definitions. The essence of their mystery cannot be mastered. In fact, Christianity and other religious traditions insist that it is idolatrous to limit God to an image, even if that image has been communicated by God.

As an example, let us say the simple phrase: “God is compassionate.” Christian tradition offers us a variety of ways to respond to such a claim. Certainly one could simply say, “Amen. God is compassionate.” One could also consider that any human concept of compassion poorly reflects the truth of God’s compassion and say in this light,

“God is not compassionate.” This tradition of negative theology is strange to Western ears, but is common in Eastern Christianity. Those of us educated in the Jesuit tradition might be more fond of saying, “God is compassionate and more.” In other words, our human concept of compassion is small but does contain a likeness of God’s compassion that is always infinitely greater than any concept of compassion that we might hold.

In short, revelation, or God’s gracious desire to communicate with human beings is at the heart of understanding and respectfully appreciating religious diversity. If God communicates in different ways with different cultures, it is perhaps because God’s self-communication, in order to be effective, must be tailored to the cultures and contexts of various peoples. God’s essence, however, remains always a mystery.

**Theological Issues**

Are all revelations equal? Is Islamic revelation equal to Christian or Hindu revelation? The obvious answer is “no.” It is the question not the answer that is problematic. Interpersonal communication between people or between God and human beings cannot be reduced to equations. Parents who have four children do not communicate with their children equally; they communicate with their children as is appropriate for each child. This self-
limiting and other-centered parental communication mirrors the kind of communication God has with human cultures. In other words, loving communication is fashioned according to the ability of the receiver to hear. It is not simply doled out in a similar style to all, irrespective of the needs of the listeners.

The understanding of God’s communication can at times be faulty. One is reminded of the cell phone commercial where the message is spoken clearly but static interferes. The older and more reflective a religious culture is, the more opportunities it has had to reject certain interpretations of God’s communication as faulty. Early Christians found that certain ways of living the Christian message did not promote healthy human and Christian community. These interpretations were branded as heretical, and early Christians rejected them. The position of some Christians, for instance, who wanted the church to become a secret club of select members was rejected in favor of a public and inclusive church.

In all religions, beliefs that undermine basic human values need to be identified as “bad” religion. It is never right for innocent children to starve, it is never right for women to be raped, it is not right for civilians to be used as military targets. Religious factions that promote atrocities of any kind in the name of religion are not hearing God’s message clearly. If grace builds on nature, then any religion that violates nature is the product of bad hearing, faulty interpretation or ill will.

If God communicates with all cultures as each culture is able to hear God, what about the Christian claim that all are saved through Jesus Christ? Certainly, to abandon this claim would be to abandon a foundational Christian axiom. Yet this Christian claim is rejected or at least modified by other world religions.

Again, this apparent contradiction is perhaps understood best within the dynamics of interpersonal communication. The parents in our above family have communicated with their children as was appropriate for each child. As a result of this communication, each child has a particular image of his or her parents. These images will be more or less accurate depending on the ability of each child to receive what has been communicated. Because each child is forming an opinion of his or her parents, who are, at core, mysteries rather than categorical realities, these opinions might seem contradictory and yet, at the same time, be true. One child might think their parents are “the worst.” Another that their parents are “the best.” Another that they “do not care.” And the fourth might feel that “they are always meddling.” On a good day, the parents will smile at all these opinions and simply say, “yes.” In fact, all are

“I’m always one who likes to participate in religious dialogue. I have friends of many traditions — and Dr. Mueller offered this way of accepting many religions: You don’t deny any one religion, and you don’t argue for the supremacy of your own. I feel so glad that I go to a Jesuit school, because I’ve learned so much about other religions in relationship to Catholicism. I am not Catholic, and it was a little intimidating at first as a Protestant Christian coming to a Catholic school. But Dr. Mueller makes it easy to be receptive to other ideas, because she, herself, is always inclusive.”

— Brooke-Lynn Luat
Honolulu
Senior, Journalism/Mass Communication major

“I am a Jain. This is an offshoot of Hinduism. It’s a very old tradition, almost more of a philosophy. Its main principle is non-violence. It’s deeper, and more that I shouldn’t do anything negative, like say something hurtful, to anyone. It’s a true respect for all life. I grew up in this tradition, though my family did not pound it into me. We go to temple, we do not hurt animals, we do not eat meat ... Dr. Mueller is saying that the only way to reach peace is to communicate among religions. It should not be a dividing force. She’s saying you can find a common ground ...”

— Saurabh Lodha
Manhasset Hills, N.Y.
Junior, Biology major
true. In the mystery of the parents’ persons they are able to hold even apparent contradictions.

Is it too much for us to imagine that what seems contradictory to us when we study the truth claims of various religions: “God is one,” “God is Trinity,” “Jesus is the only begotten Son of God,” “God is not begotten,” might actually be capable of being held together within the mystery who is God? If we move beyond the idolatrous belief that a particular religion has “God in a box,” and recognize that whatever we say of God can be negated or at least denied as capable of containing the fullness of God’s mystery, then we have to listen with respect to the revelatory words that God has spoken to others.

Finally, if we admit the possibility of respectful religious dialogue, what happens to Christian missionary activity? If religions reflect revelations of God to diverse peoples, can Christians or others legitimately engage in missionary activity? Certainly one must now proceed humbly. Mass baptisms and forced conversions have long ago been condemned by the church. Today, missionary activity is to be done within the context of respectful dialogue and careful discernment.

Face to Face: The Rewards of Interreligious Dialogue

What happens when Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and members of other religions begin speaking with each other? When this dialogue is positive, it can produce fruit on at least three levels. First, interpersonal respect is always enhanced by engaging in respectful conversation. When people learn about the religious cultures of others, harmful stereotyping and simplistic biases are undermined. Minority cultures are protected when those in the majority view these cultures with respect.

Second, dialogue with those from other religious traditions has the potential of leading one more deeply into one’s own religious faith. When one’s beliefs are questioned, the intelligent person will search more deeply to find answers. As religious traditions developed, some have refined practices that remain underdeveloped in other traditions. For example, Buddhists practice “mindfulness,” the art of living and experiencing the gift of the moment. This type of meditation is also present in the Christian tradition, but it is rather underdeveloped. Christian/Buddhist dialogue has the potential of encouraging Christians to rediscover their own tradition of finding God in every moment, in every person and in all things.

Third, dialoguing from the perspective of one’s own religious culture encourages us to claim our particular cultures more deeply. It is our experience at Creighton that students of non-Christian traditions who major in theology as undergraduates become better Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists. Few become Christians. Interreligious dialogue is primarily about embracing the religious culture given to us by God and sharing the gifts of this culture with others. In saying this, it must be understood that religions are not the same or even equally representative of the mystery of God, that God’s diverse communication with individual cultures cannot be factored out and that the details and theological complexities of these diverse traditions are essential to serious discussion.

“A lot of us come to Creighton with blinders on. But Creighton wants us to increase our awareness of the world around us. When we get here, we’re introduced to Mormons, Muslims and many other faiths. When we have a discussion, we really go into each other’s faiths ... and look deeper into our own. We then go home and take with us this openness to the world.”

— Jeremy Nicolarsen
Cheyenne, Wyo.
Junior, Biology/Theology co-major
each other from the phenomena of the chocolates. The chocolates, in fact, are not really the point. They serve only as a symbol that communicates a transcendental reality.

When one tries scientifically to dissect ritual, God language, expressions of religious community, et cetera, from the interpersonal dynamics of God’s loving communication within the messy middle of diverse cultures, one may end up with a recipe for chocolate, but one will gain little insight into the vibrant, human convictions that enliven world religions. In fact, apart from the dynamics of God’s loving communication with real inculturated human beings, the symbols of religious communication are essentially nothing more than a box of chocolates. God’s loving communication within particular cultures cannot be understood generically as if the relational dynamism of God’s communication did not matter.

**Christian Theology, Diversity and Contemporary Jesuit Education**

Historically, a distinguishing feature of Jesuit higher education is its insistence upon a philosophical and theological curriculum that offers students the tools necessary to become intelligent leaders in a complex world. Certainly, in order to operate intelligently within their professions and in their relationships, students need more than a curricular nod at religion, but how can one teach theology in a setting where Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others come together?

Creighton’s students, Christian and others, receive substantial education in philosophy and Christian theology, including historical foundations in dialogue, ethics, scripture and theology. In addition, students take at least one course in global studies, a category that includes, among other options, courses in world religions, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

The ability to do advanced theological thinking within a particular religious culture in dialogue with a diverse student body and in various intellectual and pastoral forums is certainly a predominant strength of Jesuit higher education. One would feel cheated if one attended a Muslim university and graduated without a respectable working understanding of Islam. Because religion cannot be effectively taught apart from culture, Creighton uses its strength as a Catholic, Jesuit university to invite students to explore the complex questions at the heart of its theological tradition. These questions, however, are entertained within the context of a diverse student body that brings debate, convictions and the human heart into the conversation. Certainly, one must admit that more than ever the very survival of our world requires graduates of Jesuit universities who have acquired this kind of intellectual sophistication and compassionate respect.

“A Jesuit education is absolutely welcoming. No one is excluded. In a Jesuit community, where being different is good ... seeing other cultures is good. My dad’s a Muslim; my mom, Roman Catholic ... The two traditions are equally honored at home. Dr. Mueller does not stress the identicalness of every religion. She respects the differences, and is very open to being different ...”

— Leon Bacchus
Jersey City, N.J.
Senior, Biology major

“I was born and raised in Malaysia ... My parents are Buddhist and my country is Islamic. There is freedom of religious choice ... with about 60 percent Muslim, 15 percent Buddhist, 15 percent Christian, and the rest, Hindu. My native language is Mandarin Chinese, but I learned English when I was 9 years old. I also have to know the Malay language, and I speak Cantonese with my parents, as well as Hakka. My faith is Christian, and I was baptized last year. I’m a Christian with Eastern roots.”

— Ai Sun Siow
Malaysia
Senior, Health Administration and Policy major