



Innovative Program Trains Pastors, Imams, Rabbis Together

Scholars from the three major Abrahamic faiths focus on their spiritual commonalities

Monaliza Noormohammadi | Claremont, California February 25, 2011



Photo: VOA Christian, Jewish and Muslim students learn together in classrooms at the University Project, which aims to make religion more a source of peace in the world rather than a source of conflict.

There's an ambitious effort under way, to change the way religious leaders in the United States are educated. It's a new theological program which plans to train Muslim, Jewish, and Christian clergy together.

In one southern California classroom, scholars and students from the three major Abrahamic faiths - Christianity, Islam, and Judaism - are examining sacred texts, focusing on their spiritual commonalities.

This course on interreligious leadership is part of a new graduate program taking form at the Claremont School of Theology -- an initiative that would train future pastors, rabbis and imams side-by-side, as they work toward their theological degrees.

“We think it’s the world’s first shared curriculum in interreligious understanding,” says Rev. Jerry Campbell, president of Claremont's School of Theology - an institution which has educated Methodist ministers and scholars for more than a century. “Our concern was how to make religion more a source of peace in the world rather than a source of conflict.”

The first approach, Campbell says, was to desegregate theological education. That paved the way for what’s known as the University Project - a consortium of the Claremont School of Theology, the Academy for Jewish Religion California, and the Islamic Center of Southern California.

The project is just getting off the ground. So far, seminary students at Claremont and the Jewish Academy are able to take courses at each other’s institutions. By next fall, three Muslim-leadership graduate programs will begin at Claremont, adding a number of Muslim students to the mix.

While there is no separate Islamic school yet, Claremont plans to help develop an Islamic center, with hopes of incorporating an imam-training program - the first of its kind in the United States.

And as the University Project develops, so will its diversity. The founders hope to include other faiths, such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

“You can’t really respect and get to know other people unless, unless you study with them, unless you have relationships with them,” says Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, president and dean of the Academy for Jewish Religion California. “And then you could have a clear idea of their traditions rather than stereotyping or categorizing the other out of fear or ignorance.”

The University Project will be particularly valuable to the Muslim community, says Jihad Turk, director of Religious Affairs at the Islamic Center of Southern California.

“The Muslim community has the most to gain from this University Project because Muslim-Americans are the most misunderstood,” says Turk. “And yes it will benefit all the partners because it will benefit American society at large to be more informed.”

For second-year student Emris Staton, the University Project reflects the pluralistic nature of the United States.

“Interfaith, multi-religious, diverse, what ever word you use, that’s the world we live in and preparing us to be comfortable in that context and competent in that context I think is really important.”

Certainly, American society does have its share of religious tension. Take, for example, the controversy that arose last year over plans for an Islamic center and mosque in New York, near the site of the September 11 World Trade Center attack.

Or the uproar over a Florida pastor's plan to burn copies of the Quran on the anniversary of that attack.

Campbell says that, while other issues may lie ahead, learning to overcome them is what the "progress of history is about."

Campbell and his collaborators hope the University Project will strengthen their individual faiths, and through mutual respect and understanding, strengthen America.

Comments (21)

25-02-2011

Small steps but the right steps

26-02-2011 **Merlin** (USA)

A fresh start perhaps? But how does Islam explain Shari'a as a national law. It violates the human rights of females, minorities, and all non-Muslim's. I've read the Qu'ran, but Shari'a is a disgrace to Islam.

26-02-2011 **hamad part 1 of 3** (oman)

It is an interesting Idea which could narrow the gap between the most large widespread religions in the world . At least the people who have vague view about each religion could understand what the real mean of sent prophets and messengers to our world . Those affective religious leaders should lead their society to better interaction between disciples in order to make them coexist peacefully .

26-02-2011 **hamad part 2 of 3** (oman)

They have huge responsibility to clarify how prophets came to rectify and redeem people from their sins and mistakes . Even who opposed prophets message at that time , they have not urge their disciples to kill them or even curse them but they had instead pray for them to make our lives better . Some people delved into any plea to defame who oppose them because actually they have not absorbed their religion principles probably . So their heart smell hatred and spites .

26-02-2011 **hamad part 3 of 3** (oman)

Others who have been under influence of racism and segregation exploit conflict and struggle to extend dispute in order to fulfill their aims and whims . Those kind of people have psychological problems who need to pray for them and ask our God for cure their heart .

26-02-2011 **Sashland** (USA)

The training will be incomplete if it does not also include studying the differences between the religions. Don't be selective and whitewash human rights violations. Bring in a full range of opinion if you dare. And don't claim that all three religions worship the same "God" - they specifically don't; that's why they are different religions.

26-02-2011 **kevin**

Jesus claimed to be the Word of God in the flesh complete subservient to Gods will. The quran was given by an angel, to one man. (kind of like Joseph Smith) The hebrew scriptures testify of Christ . Christ claimed he was creator of all things with God, as Gods word, spoken. Who has the authority

27-02-2011 **Eema23** (US)

Kevin- Maybe your translations and interpretations of the Hebrew bible testify to Jesus as the messiah, mine don't. If this project is to be of any use the differences MUST be examined. Otherwise the whole thing is a waste of time.

27-02-2011 **Sans** (USA)

This may start slowly and end up in the waste basket. You cannot reconcile the 3 religions. The Messiah is the difference. Jews await him, Christians pray to him, and Muslim's deny him as the Son of God. There'll be no agreement on that one!

01-03-2011 **Keiko-1970** (Japan)

I don't have any religious. For me all religious conflicts are full of paradox and futile. Now we should understand and respect the differences of each culture. This program at University is good for us to change. If clergies would get wide views and deep understanding of other culture , our world might be change little by little.

01-03-2011 **Merlin** (USA)

@Keiko-1970: Often faith and culture are interwoven and you cannot separate one from the other. You cannot respect some differences. Islam projects Shari'a as cultural, yet Shari'a violates many Christian and Western cultural principles and is intolerable.

02-03-2011 **duke** (usa)

In the beginning man created god. It's all a racket

04-03-2011 **Merlin** (USA)

@Hamad: For once you've said something meaningful. The surprise is you don't exemplify what you just said. Your own words in other posts condemn you. You favor communism, Islamic terrorism, and Shari'a. All of them murder innocent people. How is Oman doing with its Sultan?

04-03-2011 **Krux** (USA)

@Duke. You are one of the unfortunate creatures that is unable to "free" your mind from cliches. Wearing blinders, you stumble in darkness. Unable to open the veil and cross the abyss, you are afraid of TRUTH. Resist and you wither away, remove the blinders and live in the Light! Only submit your will.

04-03-2011 **Javelin** (USA)

DUKE Because you say God is dead, doesn't make it so. You see by your comment you make yourself God! So, you are simply a dog chasing its tail in search of proof that the tail is yours.

04-03-2011 **duke** (usa)

It's pathetic some people support organized religion in spite of the facts. Take responsibility and throw off your puppet masters. Think golden rule.

04-03-2011 **Observer** (Burkina Faso)

It is strongly touching to see this kind of tolerance between all these religions. At the global level, such initiatives have been overdue. Once again, USA is showing the way to the world. Diversity has never been a threat but an opportunity. USA will remain the most powerful and wealthiest Nation in the world forever. God bless USA!

07-03-2011 **Yeshua** (USA)

DUKE. You are the puppet only you wear blinders so don't realize your performing as willed by your Master of Darkness. You can't escape religion; you only go half circle and create your own which is the exact opposite. Now, you have Satan, and you have him, whether you believe it or not!

08-03-2011 **Keiko-1970** (Japan)

@Merlin:I have looked into Shari'a since I got your comment. Certainly Shari'a has some problems for human rights, however, it is understood variously in each Islamic countries now. For example Malaysia addresses and treats women as equal. The interpretation of Shari'a depends on each country's educational level, especially for women. I think educated Islamic citizen will change Shari'a's interpretation for good way. So this program is good opportunity. Education is the key to change.

08-03-2011 **Merlin** (USA)

@keiko-1970: You are correct. It does make different allowances in different Muslim countries, however, the one common thread is that it makes Islam the state religion. This, naturally, makes other faiths subservient to Islam. Shari'a to me is evil and ugly in practice, and in violation of ALLAH. It is an Islamic contradiction, of which there are many.

08-03-2011 **Ami** (USA)

Sharia points of fact: Allows old men to have 4 wives and they may be as young as 9 years of age for sex and abuse, disallows free speech and freedom of religion, it doesn't offer equality, justice or dignity for non-Muslim's. It produces HATE, murderers, and sexual abusers.