

The Claremont School of Theology makes history as the world's first multi-religious graduate school

By pat launer -- San Diego Jewish Journal (January 2010)



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Talk about your change in climate. The Claremont School of Theology, founded in 1956, has evolved from denominational (Methodist) to ecumenical (pan-Christian) to a groundbreaking multi-religious graduate school that aims to train Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and other clerics — together. That's one giant leap for mankind.

A Little Historical Perspective

In the mid-1950s, Christian seminaries in the U.S., which had been strictly denominational, started becoming ecumenical. But crossing denominational boundaries was quite controversial. The fear was that, if you educate Methodists and Lutherans together, for example, you'll water down both denominations. There are a few inter-denominational Jewish seminaries, but most serve a single branch of Judaism (principally Orthodox, Conservative or Reform). Muslim clerics are educated primarily in the Middle East, where schools focus on a single tradition within Islam (Sunni, which comprises 85 percent of the Muslim population, or Shia, 14 percent). There are no accredited Muslim seminaries in the United States. Now Claremont steps onto the cutting edge with an eye toward

developing an interfaith program that educates Christian, Jewish and Muslim clerics to start, with plans to incorporate Buddhist, Hindu and other religious traditions later on. The "University Project," as it's being called, expects to have the Jewish and Muslim programs ready to go by fall 2011. "We are not proposing to quit educating United Methodist ministers," says School of Theology president Jerry Campbell. "But we are pretty convinced that steeping people in their own juices doesn't create a broad-minded leader who can go out and create coalitions."

America's Religious Diversity

"These days, it's clear that the U.S. is growing more religiously diverse," Campbell asserts. "Data suggest that over 50 percent of Americans are married to someone from another religious affiliation. Many children are growing up in religiously pluralistic households, their spiritual identities being formed by more than one religious perspective. "We find ourselves in a rapidly changing society with more and more people of different religious convictions living among us," Campbell continues. "In the mid-20th century, we debated the differences among Christians. Today, the differences are between whole communities, with vastly divergent worldviews, religions and cultural heritages." This monumental educational change was motivated by many factors, not the least of which were mounting financial pressures and the declining number of theological students, which has been noted across religions (an estimated 10 percent drop overall in all U.S. seminaries). But according to Campbell, one of the most urgent and compelling reasons was "the need to transform religion from being a frequent cause of conflict, often with the threat of destroying the world, to becoming a means of healing conflict and beginning to repair the world." If this sounds like the Jewish tenet of *tikkun olam* (healing the world), it's no accident. "We used *tikkun olam* as our guiding principle," Campbell says. "We'd like to see our graduates become active in repairing the world rather than fracturing it more; seeing religion as a constructive way for neighbors to help the earth and the environment rather than as a way to quarrel with one another. This model could lead to a generation of religious leaders who work collaboratively on common problems, such as homelessness and hunger, that don't pay any attention to religious differences."

REACTION TO THE IDEA

The internal response within the School of Theology has been "very positive." Current students are "aware and enthusiastic." The school's accreditors (the Association of Theological Schools and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges) are, Campbell says, "interested and watching." Some in the United Methodist Church are "very supportive; some are wary." "Some concern is to be expected," he admits. "Change is always difficult. But I think this was an inspired decision by our Board of Trustees, and I think if we work hard at it, we'll make it a success. It will take people who see this as a positive factor for our future." Conversations with Jewish and Muslim groups are "delicate, but going well. It will take the next

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decade to work it all out," Campbell says. "We're taking our time. It has to evolve. We're starting with the three Abrahamic religions and proceeding from there. "We have a critical mass here in Southern California in terms of population diversity," Campbell says. "Our multi-cultural and multi-religious communities are a bit ahead of the rest of the country. We're what much of the world will look like in the next 50 years. Clearly, there's a need for what we're doing." To fill that need, the campus has to change to accommodate the new focus and new potential students and faculty. Already, when Divinity students from a non-Christian background lead services in the beautiful chapel on campus, the 'congregants' turn their chairs around so they face the back of the hall instead of the front, which is adorned with a huge cross. "We're aware that we will have to create and bring in other symbols," Campbell says. "Even other foods, other considerations of the school calendar and religious holidays. We're taking all this into account."

HOW IT WILL WORK

The plan is to have separate tracks of study, "for as many as we have denominational partners," Campbell explains. At present, the School of Theology has three to four different tracks to accommodate the 30-40 different Christian denominations represented, including Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Orthodox Armenian and many others. Bible study would be separate; ethics, together. Students will also be able to sign up for Christian ethics or Islamic or Jewish ethics. Certain courses are currently required of all Masters of Divinity students, including "World Religions in Dialogue," which entails visits to varying religious institutions. This will be an area of active growth under the new program. "We're hoping to have a positive impact on theological training and how different religions relate to each other," Campbell says.

A JEWISH STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE

Rabbi Zev Feyer hasn't exactly trod the straight and narrow path to get to where he is. He was born in Manhattan, NY, attended high school in Phoenix, Ariz., and began his college education at Stanford University, but didn't complete his bachelor's degree until 40 years later, at Pace University in New York (with a major in math). He received his rabbinical ordination by studying privately with three rabbis from the tradition of Jewish Renewal, which is separate from the three primary branches of Judaism. As Rabbi Feyer explains, Jewish Renewal is "a blending of mysticism, joy and passion with modernism, universalism and egalitarianism." For years, Rabbi Feyer worked as a hospital chaplain in South Carolina and Kansas City and then went back east to finish his undergraduate degree. From there, he went on for a master's degree — at Claremont School of Theology. Now, at age 68, he's working on his Ph.D. "I originally planned on getting a Master of Divinity degree," Rabbi Feyer explains, "which is preferred for chaplaincy certification and is generally offered at Christian institutions. But I fell so much in love with academia that I wanted to go on, and to teach, instead

of pursuing chaplaincy." So he obtained a Master of Arts degree in religion with an emphasis in Hebrew learning. "Claremont was very welcoming," he says. "Everyone was always totally supportive and affirming." Among the roughly 40 to 50 students in his Master of Divinity classes, three or four were Jewish. "There was no difficulty or stigma at all. I absolutely fell in love with the place, the openness, the multi-cultural atmosphere. I'm a rabbi with a degree from a Protestant seminary. That's pretty multi-cultural right there!" Rabbi Feyer is "excited about the new inter-religious program" at Claremont. "There's so much we can learn from each other. I see it as a tremendous enhancement of the religious education process. It will provide an academic graduate degree with a religious orientation that's not dependent on any particular faith tradition. I don't know of any other program like that." Already impressed with the school's library, Rabbi Feyer sought to enhance the collection with a \$15,000 gift to endow an expanded Jewish Studies collection. "In our classes, there's so much of 'Explain to me what your tradition believes about such and such.' Not a challenge, like I felt in another, more conservative Divinity program. This was about really wanting to understand. People who feel a need to be very narrow will not be comfortable in this type of open atmosphere." "We have a chance to make a difference," says School of Theology president Jerry Campbell. "I hope we're evolving beyond religion as competition. A conversation among religions has to take place for world harmony and peace. Why not be the denomination and the school that hosts the conversation?" "With this new program at Claremont," Rabbi Feyer says, "I feel like a trailblazer. This could be life-changing for the world." A • *To learn more about the Claremont School of Theology, visit www.cst.edu.*