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Mary Elizabeth Moore , Boyung Lee , Katherine Turpin , Ralph Casas , Lynn  
Bridgers & Veronice Miles

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# REALITIES, VISIONS, AND PROMISES OF A MULTICULTURAL FUTURE

Mary Elizabeth Moore  
*Candler School of Theology, Emory University*

Boyoung Lee  
*Pacific School of Religion*

Katherine Turpin  
*Ilfiff School of Theology*

Ralph Casas  
*Cerritos College*

Lynn Bridgers  
*Spring Hill College*

Veronice Miles  
*Emory University*

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## ***Abstract***

Religious education has changed considerably over the 100 years of the Religious Education Association (REA); urgency has increased for human communities to honor diversity. The focus of this article is realities, visions, and promises of *cultural* diversity. The article includes an overview of REA's recent history, exemplifying its efforts and limitations in diversity. It then turns to five commentaries on a multicultural future, drawing on autobiographical analysis, religious and educational literature, and empirical study. Authors explicate and argue for: engaging in post-colonial analysis, de-centering assumptions, searching for a story to claim, taking time, and entering deep waters.

Realities, visions, promises—  
of a beginning, middle, end  
of a hundred years of meeting, yearning, striving—  
conjuring dreams,

constructing visions,  
 stretching toward promises yet to be.

Realities, visions, promises—  
 of an ending century,  
     turned to begin again;  
 of a multi-cultural future—  
     long dreamed,  
         slow to come,  
             filled with hope;  
 for a new day when REA  
     will learn and teach  
         the ways of being *many* and *whole*,  
             ways of delighting in difference,  
                 ways of struggling with difference,  
             ways of honoring our elders,  
         ways of receiving light from their torches,  
 and walking boldly into new realities, visions, promises!

(Moore 2003)

This article focuses on realities, visions, and promises of a multicultural future. As authors who care deeply about these matters, we seek to challenge religious educators and the Religious Education Association (REA) with constructive visions, especially as the Association begins its second century. Our team of authors represents the Association's diversity, but only some of it. We are all Christian (diverse branches of Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions), and all live in the United States, though one grew up in Korea. We represent diverse ethnicities and regions (five states), but our gender diversity is minimal (only one man). We come from wide-ranging vocations and histories of experience, but can only represent our primary communities and ourselves, humbly acknowledging that we cannot fully represent *any* community and certainly not the full range of religious educators. With the exception of the editor, however, the authors are all young scholars with rich experience and brilliant vision. Who better than they to point to the future?

### **LOOKING BACK ON REALITIES, VISIONS, AND PROMISES OF THE PAST**

As a prelude to our journey into the future, we consider four movements that have blown through REA's history in relation to cultural

diversity. This brief introduction—grounded in REA history (Schmidt 1983), Board Minutes (1982–1994), and Conference Programs (1983–2003)—uncovers visions and efforts of the past, as well as limitations. It also points to the courage and spirit of adventure that have marked the Religious Education Association's engagement with hard realities and new possibilities over time. The strength of this past is critical to our future.

### ***Rainbow Dreams***

In 1903, the Religious Education Association began as a rainbow dream, gathering psychologists, philosophers, and educational theorists with leaders in higher education, religious communities, and religiously affiliated organizations. Although the early founders, and most of the members, were white professional men in the United States, they represented diverse vocations, religious locations, and worldviews. Thus, the rainbow dream was born.

From 1969 to the present, the Religious Education Association has become increasingly intentional in attending to cultural diversity. This is reflected in *Religious Education* and other publications, REA conference participation, and membership on REA's Board of Directors. Many people have critiqued the limits of these efforts, especially REA leaders, who have seen how much more could be done; yet, changes have been steady, continuing to this day. From 1988 to the present, the REA has also attended to becoming more fully interfaith, widening its programs and membership beyond the Christian and Jewish range of earlier years. In spite of these efforts, the dreams have been elusive, partly because of competing educational and religious organizations, partly because of inadequacies in the efforts themselves, and partly because of the history and social context that have shaped the REA.

One could summarize the significance of REA's growing diversity dreams in two ways: (a) growing recognition that public discourse in religion and education needs to *include diverse peoples and reflect on issues arising from all forms of diversity*, and (b) growing vision for religious education to *address issues of justice, mutuality, and inclusiveness* in religious and educational institutions. This said, REA's limitations have been painfully visible, even when religious and educational literature on diversity was burgeoning (Banks 1997, 2002, 2004; Banks and Banks, 1995; Gay 2000; Armstrong and Barton 1999; Gardner 1993, 1999; Woyshner and Gelfond 1997; Beauboeuf-Lafontant and Augustine 1996; Graham 1996, 169–191; Sleeter and McLaren 1995;

Goldberg 1994; Cajete 1994; hooks 1989, 1994; Sleeter and Grant, 1987; Bowers and Flinders 1990; Young 1990).

Despite limits, religious educators have given increasing attention to diversity. Some have focused on diversity in relation to shifting social and theological patterns (Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett 2004; Wright 2004; Jackson 1997, 2002; Heimbrock, Scheilke, and Schreiner 2001; Moore 2001; Hobson and Edwards 1999; Andree, Bakker, and Schreiner 1997; Foster 1997; Foster and Brelsford 1996). Others have attended to particular religious or cultural communities as a way of enhancing sensitivity and responsiveness to particular communities (Wimberly and Parker 2002; Boys 2000; Hess 1997; Ng 1996; Black 1996; Zeldin and Lee 1995; Ng 1988). The challenge for an organization like REA has been to hold the extensive diversity in one association with a unified, non-hegemonic mission and an interactive discourse. One temptation has been to allow diverse agenda to cancel each other. Another has been to attend to cultural issues in general, without fully engaging with people in diverse social and religious locations. Another temptation is simply to be overwhelmed.

### *Hard Realities*

The Religious Education Association has consistently worked to address social realities and to engage religious education in the public forum. This was a motivation of the founders and has continued in various forms over the years. In 1969, the executive secretary, Herman Wornom, and a committee planned a convention focused on social vision, stirring controversy within the Association (Schmidt 1983, 181–185). Jumping to 1983, the REA Convention theme was “Tikkun Olam: Educating toward Justice and Peace.” This began dynamic conversations about diversity, which continued in the Board. REA had already begun to reflect more diversity, but, as diversity increased, some were frightened that the Association would lose its center, and others thought that the efforts were too little too late. The discussions led to several new efforts, which have continued to the present time. As homogeneity decreased, the challenges increased; yet the REA recommitted to a public, social, and inclusive vision again and again.

The persisting public orientation of the REA has itself been a challenge; it has led people to meet with others quite different from themselves and to engage with public issues that have no easy explanations or solutions. Two of the results are: (a) discovering the

almost insurmountable challenges of being truly multicultural, and (b) realizing how biased the REA and other religious and educational institutions have really been. During recent decades, at the same time that REA leaders have engaged in self-critique, critical theory has emerged forcefully in the educational literature and study of religion. Such movements have challenged the REA from without, as members challenge themselves from within.

### *Faltering Steps*

Practices of critical reflection and persistent action have characterized the REA, leading to active, though often faltering, steps throughout its history. Massive efforts have been made since 1979 to diversify the Board of Directors ethnically, regionally, and religiously. These efforts had counterparts in earlier decades. In 1992, the REA Conference focused on adult education—a seemingly non-controversial topic—but the conference gave considerable attention to ethnic and religious diversity, and to global realities of the period. From the mid-1990s, the REA focused on interreligious dialogue, bringing that work to ever-widening circles, including seven mini-conferences with Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and one major conference focused on interreligious relationships.

What has come from our faltering steps? First, we have recognized the bottomless complexity of multicultural concerns, but we have also made strides in increasing cultural diversity in the REA and other educational institutions. We have also faced some of the difficult issues that these efforts raise, and we will continue to face them long into the future.

### *Committing to the Long Road*

This discussion leads to the present moment and the challenge of a multicultural future. The challenge for religious educators is to commit to the long journey, with small and large steps along the way. The essays that follow suggest future directions, and challenge educators to open themselves to the inevitable joys, struggles, and transformations that accompany a multicultural journey.

## LOOKING FORWARD TO REALITIES, VISIONS, AND PROMISES OF THE FUTURE

The statements that follow represent the experience and research of five scholars, who have engaged in dialogue with one another in creating this article. Our primary purpose is to engender further dialogue regarding multicultural realities, visions, and promises. To that end, we draw on diverse methods: autobiographical analysis, critical engagement with religious and educational literature, and empirical study. The article as a whole offers complementary perspectives, while raising tensions for further consideration. We hope that educators will continue, enlarge, and transform this cultural and trans-cultural discourse in their religious and educational communities, and also in public venues, REA meetings, and *Religious Education*. The underlying hope is that religious educators will be bold in envisioning the future.

### ***Engaging in Postcolonial Analysis: Some postmodern scholars who speak from the perspective of the “other” and criticize the domination of the theological center actually perpetuate marginalization***

*Boyung Lee takes us on the first leg of this journey of awareness and transformation.*

Recently, I received an email from a white feminist colleague at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU). Although we had not met in person, she addressed her email, “Dear Boyung,” and asked me to advertise her upcoming class. As a new junior faculty person, I was honored—thrilled, really—to be noticed by an internationally known senior scholar; however, my excitement slowly changed to sadness as I read the syllabus. The class was about an ancient Chinese thinker and his school’s philosophy of religion. However, nowhere in the syllabus would the class address Chinese culture or religion, nor did the syllabus include works by Chinese scholars. I was facing a GTU version of what bell hooks describes as:

. . . a will to include those considered “marginal” without a willingness to accord their work the same respect and consideration given other work. . . . What does it mean when a white female English professor is eager to include a work by Toni Morrison on the syllabus of her course but then teaches that work without ever making reference to race or ethnicity? (1994, 38)

Some postmodern scholars—those who speak from the perspective of the “other” and criticize the long domination of a theological center—actually perpetuate marginalization. Defining *some* of many voices as “marginal” bespeaks tokenism, a mindset that prevails in many educational settings and, according to hooks, undermines the multicultural transformation that we seek. Although the “other” has much to say about gender, race, religion, and economics, postmodern literature often portrays others primarily as oppressed victims, those who desperately need the salvation of the center.

Kwok Pui-lan, a postcolonial Asian feminist theologian, observes that Chinese women, as described by Mary Daly, are passive victims to Chinese men’s oppression. Daly’s logic is that, because Chinese women cannot speak for themselves, Western feminists should save them from Chinese men (Kwok 2002, 69–75). Kwok points out that Daly’s description of Chinese women is still based on a Western colonial mentality; she misappropriates Chinese women in her effort to posit universal patriarchy. Thus, Daly overlooks Chinese women’s role in history, both their shaping of it and their resistance to patriarchy. Such approaches to *other*-ness are based on tokenism, and on a Western colonial mentality that trivializes diversity while—at least in current discourse—pretending to celebrate it.

When such tokenism is welcomed and celebrated by the “other” in the name of multicultural discourse, it can further marginalize people who are already marginalized. As the only full-time woman of color on tenure track at the GTU, I am often asked to represent the marginalized at official functions. Seemingly, my ethnicity or accent represents the collective consciousness of non-whites. This “special” place where I speak on behalf of the margin to the center—despite the fact that I am, ironically, in the center—is both a sweet and dangerous place. It is sweet because it makes me feel important and special. But it is dangerous because I face the temptation to misappropriate or universalize others’ stories for the sake of my specialness.

Whether we perceive ourselves to be at the center or the margin, we live in multiple locations simultaneously, like a subatomic particle. Being a professor at a major theological institution gives me authority and power that those on the margins do not have; this naturally puts me in the center. However, my experience as a Korean woman immigrant, one who speaks with a strong accent, constantly reminds me of my place in the margin.

In the Korean community, I am at the center (a professor and a clergy person) and the margin (a woman in a Confucian community).



In other words, I live both at the center and margin, floating between the two, and creating other multiple locations on the way. I also find that many of my colleagues who are perceived to be at the center are also living in multiple places. Many of us, including myself, are aware of our multiple locations and the danger of choosing to identify with only one of these; we know that we live, in fact, in many places.

From this border where I am sometimes (most of the time?) located, I now make several suggestions for multicultural religious education, which are further articulated in my colleagues' essays. First, *we need to approach multicultural religious education with multidimensional hermeneutics through which both centers and margins can be challenged and transformed*. Multicultural religious education is not a one-time dialogue between two parties (e.g., the center and one of the marginalized groups); rather, it is an ongoing conversation and shared praxis among all parties, including those with radically different cultures and worldviews. For such a multiple dialogue, we need to learn and relearn how to engage one another.

Postcolonial biblical hermeneutics is helpful here because it conjoins critical thinking with multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural voices. It, thus, attends to denied rights of the margin *and* it challenges the center concurrently (Sugirtharajah 2002, 13). For example, Fernando Segovia suggests a multidimensional biblical hermeneutic that utilizes the sociopolitically complicated world of the text, the politically motivated interpretations of the center, in relation to today's readers and their respective contexts (2000, esp. ch. 5).

Segovia argues that the text itself was written in imperialist contexts, a world of colonial empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The political, economic, cultural, and religious dynamics in those empires between centralized authority and those without power heavily influenced the production of the Bible. Therefore, questions about culture, ideology, and power are *sine qua non* for understanding the text. Segovia also urges Bible readers to pay attention to the expansion of Western imperialism that was part of Christianity's kerygma, wherewith the Bible justified colonization. Lastly, Segovia emphasizes critical analyses of how contemporary readers engage the Bible and its interpretations in daily life. He investigates the dynamics of the center and margin among themselves and between each other. In sum, multidimensional hermeneutics, which simultaneously investigates and analyzes the world of the text, the world of interpreters, and the world of readers, is a method that invites participants of multicultural education to engage historically and cross-culturally (Dube 1997, 11).

Second, *we need to clarify the purpose of multicultural religious education*. Consistent with Katherine Turpin's analysis of misunderstandings, the purpose of multiculturalism should be neither inclusion nor co-existence. Its purpose should be the liberation of the most marginalized among us. When someone is suffering due to exclusion and oppression, how can one celebrate multiculturalism? Those of us who pursue a multicultural future need to ask Kwok's question: How much do our multicultural efforts contribute "to lessening human suffering; to building communities that resist oppression within the church, academy, and the society; to furthering the liberation of those among us who are most disadvantaged, primarily the women and the children" (1995, 31). To this end, rereading and reinterpreting the text from a postcolonial perspective is crucial, because texts and Western interpretations have been used to justify the suffering of marginalized peoples.

Third, *we need to remember that there are multiple centers and margins, both within the center and within the margin*. In my Korean context, we have centers and margins inherited from Korean traditions, such as patriarchy, classism, and hierarchy. We also have centers and margins planted by the colonizers. We, ourselves, have created other centers and margins, such as economic inequality. These differences reveal centers and margins within the larger margin: "centers within the margin" and "margins within the margin," respectively. If we do not address this complexity of centers and margins, multicultural conversations will be empty words. At the same time, we cannot expect to find one right ordering of centers and margins; their relationship is always complex, at times complementary and at times destructive. We need to recognize with Segovia that investigating the centers and margins is an essential part of multiple hermeneutics. In sum, multicultural religious education needs multiple hermeneutics that allow us to challenge the center within and without, and to bring forth life to all by joining in the work of justice with people who live on the margins within the margin.

Fourth, *we need to examine critically and study the center*. My white colleagues should, for instance, try to understand what it means to be white before they try to understand nonwhite communities. In Segovia's sense, revisiting and unlearning the Western imperialist interpretation of the text is an integral part of this process. Ironically, even in the center, there are sub-centers and margins; however, in academic discourse we typically homogenize the center as though we have all agreed on what it is. White people often raise questions about

their identities as white and the privileges they have as white people. To reflect on contributions that white individuals can make to multicultural community would be a good starting point. In a nutshell, talking about others without knowing oneself is nonsense.

Finally, *I suggest that “others”—those of us from the margins—stop imagining nonexistent centers.* As I noted, there are many sub-centers within the center; however, when we assert one norm, then we effectively limit our contributions to multiculturalism, as if our thoughts were afterthoughts. Then, rather than inviting diverse groups of whites to the round table, we turn to our neighbors sitting around the edge and grumble about the “center,” thus, allowing it to control our actions and define us.

We need to reflect critically on who our conversation partners are, and why we tend to talk back rather than to talk *with* the “center.” Further, we need to keep revisiting our goals—our hopes and dreams—lest they be lost to hand-wringing about the center. T. Minh-Ha Trinh opines that, for many, difference means division. When we accept that argument, difference becomes a “tool of self-defense and conquest” (1989, 82). Thus the master calmly keeps her place at a nonexistent center while “others” fool-headedly jockey to be nearby. When that happens, whether intended or not, we are trapped in that sweet but dangerous “special” place.

***De-Centering Assumptions: Participating in a multicultural future means learning graciously to sing apart and sing together, as one voice in a larger chorus***

*Katherine Turpin turns to her experience as a white educator struggling to understand “whiteness” in the context of an institution committed to diversity.*

Having recently relocated to Denver, Colorado, after nine years in Atlanta, Georgia, my husband and I remarked that Denver is the whitest place we have ever lived. According to the 2000 Census data ([www.denvergov.org](http://www.denvergov.org)), Denver is diverse—about 52% Anglo, 32% Hispanic, 11% Black, and 5% other ethnic groups; however, in neighborhoods around the University of Denver where I live and work, the Anglo population runs close to 83%. Further, the institution where I teach is predominantly white. The faculty and administration have intentionally increased the school’s diversity, yet the student body consists largely of persons from mainline Protestant denominations in the predominantly white Plains and Rocky Mountain States. Therefore,

when I teach, I am often a white person teaching a class of nearly all-white students. I am struck by the deep irony of writing out of this context.

A difficult self-realization for Iliff has been the growing awareness that being committed to diversity is not the same thing as being a multicultural institution. Many kinds of diversity are present in the classroom—theological understandings, faith traditions, regional differences, and class differences—but an overlying cultural tone persists due to the predominance of middle-class white students. Being honest about the school's historic and cultural roots as a white institution, and working to understand that “whiteness,” may be the most faithful way to engage in multicultural education in such a setting. Such a context calls for perhaps even more careful attention to multicultural reality, although in different ways than in other settings. Boyung Lee has already noted bell hooks's warning that predominantly white teaching settings often generate a “spirit of tokenism” rather than a perspective that truly affirms multiculturalism (1994, 43). Transforming such a setting can be challenging, particularly when students do not recognize the need to affirm diverse cultural perspectives and when people of color are not present.

### *Misunderstandings*

In predominantly white settings, despite good intentions, multicultural education can miss the mark. Some misunderstandings even reinforce patterns of cultural domination.

**First misunderstanding:** *A multicultural education means inclusion of those formerly relegated to the margins.* Although inclusion is undoubtedly a better value than exclusion, the rhetoric of inclusion maintains the idea of a normative center and focuses on inviting others into its privileged realm. A Korean pastor described a conference of his mainline Protestant denomination; the theme was “Who’s at the Table?” and the purpose, to increase recognition of multicultural presence within the denomination. When my colleague was asked to share his perspective at the conference, he noted that, while he was at the table, he was clear that it was at someone else’s invitation. He felt like a perennial guest in a place where others feel at home. He expressed hope that, rather than inviting people to a pre-established table, a new gathering place could be established that did not privilege one cultural starting place. *Rather than working from a paradigm of inclusion, bringing people from the margins to the center, multicultural*

efforts need to dismantle the very idea of the center and to engage in collaborative planning and leadership at every turn.

**Second misunderstanding:** *A multicultural future is about “having” enriching experience through encounters with “the other.”* This misunderstanding can lead to disrespectful interactions. Patricia Williams describes how some African-American churches have to cope with tourists who attend worship services and more private religious rituals, such as funerals as though they existed for the cultural experience of outsiders (1997, 21ff). Such tourist encounters with “the other” allow “us” to maintain power. If multicultural experiences serve only to broaden the experience of white persons, the dangers to others are great; further, white experience is never de-centered. Paradoxically, a multicultural future requires spaces where people gather separately—where people honor the boundaries that others set regarding experiences that they will and will not share. Entering into multicultural dialogue and sharing experiences requires particular humility on the part of culturally dominant groups; care is needed to ensure that the encounter is mutually desired and beneficial.

At the same time, experience with diversity is essential in the development of critical thinking and ethical formation, especially when different cultures are afforded equal consideration in the encounter. Sharon Parks reflects on this in relation to the formation of professional ethics in young adults:

An integral part of the development of a more broadly informed and complex perspective is the cultivation of diverse points of view. Fostering diversity of perspective in the curriculum serves two dimensions of ethical formation. First, the complexity . . . is heightened. Second, a more empathic imagination is fostered. (1993, 53)

Parks finds empathic imagination necessary to exercise moral courage. Empathy is “a strength manifested in the ability to see things from multiple perspectives, be affected by them, and take them into account” (53). Through exploring case studies and ethical problems, persons can develop empathic imagination, which is critical for systemic ethical decision making. Parks further observes that persons from non-dominant cultures often develop this skill as they navigate in dominant cultures; persons from dominant cultures often lag behind in the capacity to see things from multiple perspectives. Thus, *helping persons from dominant cultures to de-center their perspectives and engage with multiple perspectives is critical; educators need to encourage cultural-crossings*

*without reducing them to strategies for the sole educational benefit of people in dominant cultures.*

**Third misunderstanding:** *We can talk about the wondrous variety of multicultural gifts and perspectives without mentioning that they are usually hierarchically valued in the United States.* When I was in elementary school, at least once a year we had a “multicultural festival” where everyone brought foods and music from their culture of origin. Although this was an important step in valuing diverse cultural backgrounds, the festival approach fell short as a model of multicultural education. We never talked about how some of these cultures were devalued in United States society and others were privileged—an omission that is ethically suspect. *To introduce multicultural experiences as if “otherness” is not hierarchically affected by histories of racism and classism fails to address a critical piece of multicultural experience.*

**Fourth misunderstanding:** *A multicultural future is about a warm, uncomplicated community with people who are different from us.* bell hooks notes that one hallmark of a multicultural classroom is conflict (1994, 39). To be in relationship across cultural boundaries requires wrestling with real differences about important issues, addressing differences of power and privilege, and struggling to hear one another when people speak in different languages and metaphors, and express diverse values and ways of being. Few educational and religious settings offer sustained opportunities for people to practice such community. Congregations discover major challenges when they attempt to integrate cultural groups without shared assumptions. Nancy Ammerman explains, “Creating a working congregation from such diverse elements goes against many of the norms of U.S. congregational life” (1997, 198). Even so, people continue to expect perfect harmony.

Being involved in multicultural community requires a commitment to rethink the idea of safe space—from a place of openness, comfort, warmth, and no conflict to a place where people work together to build a climate of openness and establish common ground. If we cannot learn to value the struggle, we will continue to replicate inequities in efforts to ease strains. *Multicultural communities are places to face problems and conflicts, then to struggle in reconstructing oppressive realities.*

### ***Learning to Sing the Lord’s Song in a Different Tongue***

In my context, affirming the importance of multicultural perspectives means working to deconstruct the perceived center—imaged as

the head table's inviting others into its fellowship. Many of my students do not experience this white table as cultural or ethnic, but as normal. Moving into a multicultural future requires that people accustomed to being in the assumed center be given opportunities to experience themselves as members of an ethnic group. Because of the history of racism and cultural domination, this may involve grieving the lost privilege of interpreting oneself primarily as an individual rather than a member of an ethnic group, even a group that others often perceive as undesirable (Tatum 1997, 102).

To respond constructively to this sense of loss indicates the need for all-white groups to reflect on what it means to be members of the dominant cultural group. Educator Beverly Daniel Tatum notes:

Particularly when Whites are trying to work through their feelings of guilt and shame, separate groups give White people the "space to speak with honesty and candor rarely possible in racially-mixed groups." Even when Whites feel comfortable sharing these feelings with people of color, frankly, people of color don't necessarily want to hear about it. (109–110)

Whereas "whites-only" gatherings are rightfully suspect, given the history of such meetings in the United States, Tatum's gatherings have purposes different from strategizing to maintain power. Such gatherings allow white people who want to dismantle racism to share honest feelings in their struggle to deal with their racist formation.

Of course, a multicultural future also requires sustained conversation with persons across cultural perspectives, the kind of deep-water experience that Veronice Miles describes in the final section of this paper. This means that predominantly white institutions need to attend to "admissions policies as well as course structure and content" (Parks 1993, 54). In multicultural settings, cultural diversity is important, as is the willingness of all people to share their cultures and to speak and listen in the cultural idioms of others. One role of religious educators is to help white people accept the difficulty of singing the Lord's song in a foreign tongue (Psalm 137, 1–4), an experience that other cultural groups have had in the United States for four centuries. This experience is often resisted and white people wistfully remember when they did not have to sing the Lord's song in a different tongue. A multicultural future means that people may learn graciously to sing apart and sing together, as one voice in a large chorus.

***Searching for a Story to Claim: Whoever you are, your story is sacred, and the story of your people is sacred***

*Ralph Casas emphasizes that constructing identity means having multilingual educators who share and respect the values of their students.*

Searching for a story to claim as one's own is a lifelong journey fraught with pain and wonder. As a young child, I heard many stories designed to form in me a sacred story, a story that told me what it meant to be human. Most young children appropriate a story in a similar way and incorporate it into their identity as a function of who they are—their race, class, and national origin—and where they belong—their understanding of their place in society (Gay 2000, 2). A significant challenge faced by people of color, and anyone whose story differs from mainstream society, is to form a holistic identity and a healthy story. Living on the margins, the struggle to construct and maintain a healthy identity, becomes a significant function of the story itself.

I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. This historical fact was a powerful part of my young story that grew in significance when I discovered it was acceptable to tell some stories publicly and not acceptable to tell others. Growing up in a predominantly white, middle-class world, I learned that my classmates would react negatively when I revealed I was “Mexican” or “Mexican American,” but would be interested when I revealed I was born in Hawaii. Suddenly, I was palatable.

For most young children of color, these multiple and mixed messages still exist. Every culture teaches its children that *Whoever you are, your story is sacred, and the story of your people is sacred*. Yet, young persons of color also learn that the public spaces where they learn and play are different. In these public spaces, the Euro-centric world dictates their life—their manner of communication and their way of being—including thought, action, and talk. Children become aware at a young age that there are codes or rules for participating in the power structures. The rules of this culture of power are dictated by, and reflective of, those who have power. In time, students with different customs and norms begin to feel substandard or inappropriate. Pressured to conform, those with distinct ways of communicating, thinking, and being begin to perceive themselves as inferior. The inability to display publicly the beliefs and characteristics of their culture eventually stifles a young child's identity and, over the course of his or



her schooling, results in a sense of “cultural incongruity” (Castellanos and Jones 2003, 8).

Nowhere are these messages more evident to a child than in the United States school system. That these two realities exist side-by-side in the school system is no accident. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger argue that schooling is about constructing identities—it is the “historical production, transformation, and change of persons” through pedagogical practices toward reproducing the social values, behaviors, cultural knowledge, and type of social person defined by the dominant majority as appropriate (1993, 51). By its very nature, education is a fundamental agent of acculturation that perpetuates the prevailing social order. Without revolutionary change, the system will simply continue to reproduce the primary dominant culture rather than result in the transformation of culture.

I currently teach at Cerritos College in Norwalk, California. Cerritos College is a community college, where over 75% of the students identify themselves as “non-white.” In contrast, over 70% of the administrators and faculty are white. Unlike Iliff, where Katherine Turpin experiences a relatively homogenous institution committed to diversity, I experience at Cerritos College an environment with multiple and diverse cultures, but with marginal institutional commitment to diversifying its faculty or administration.

In 2002, we began a five-year project aimed at increasing the number of historically under-represented students who enter the health-care professions. A primary goal of Project HOPE, Health Opportunities and Pipeline to Education, is to increase the number of these students entering and continuing their education beyond community college. The program objective is to create a pipeline of students who are prepared to succeed in health, math, and science courses. One strategy utilized to achieve this goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of culturally specific pedagogy in the classroom.

In preparation for this article, I asked 60 students who are members of Project HOPE the following: “If you were able to change the school to make it respond to your needs: (1) how would the school look and/or be different, and (2) describe ways that your educational experiences would change?” The questions were posed to students in the class, “Health of Underserved Communities.” Students responded in writing and discussed their answers for 90 minutes in a roundtable setting. As the instructor, I took extensive notes, listened to the responses and the discussion that followed, and offered minimal input during the process.

In analyzing my notes, I grouped the responses according to students' concerns. Students' most common responses fell into four areas: "teachers," "the school system," "language," and "culture." In each area, a general theme emerged. First, the students strongly believe they need educators with whom they can relate. Second, they need teachers who look like them, who understand their culture and their values (family), and who respect their ways of thinking and learning. Third, they need teachers who speak multiple languages or, at minimum, have a basic knowledge of the way they speak about their world. Finally, they want educators who realize that their values and culture are important to them.

### *Interpretation*

How might we interpret the responses of these students regarding their expectations of the school system? Primarily, students seek educators who are able to relate to their experiences as learners. In the language of the academy, they are asking for "learner-centered pedagogy," grounded in their everyday lived reality. They want teachers to engage them in ways that encourage thinking and force them to make meaning of their lives. They also ask that educators be willing to struggle with their central epistemological questions: "Who validates the knowledge of the academy?" and "Who determines the wisdom of our community?"

Although not explicitly stated, a second message expressed in virtually every response was the need for a special "in-between" person or persons capable of understanding the strong sense of cultural incongruity these students feel as outsiders. In essence, students are crying out, "Signs can lie. People can lie. Help us know the truth." Acting in the role of a mentor, as accented by Lynn Bridgers in the next section, the "in-between" person can assist by facilitating the reading and interpreting of the institution's signs and symbols for students, and then translate the meaning of these signs into words students understand.

Finally, a strong message that lay beneath the surface of their polite answers: "We do not want to assimilate! Our cultures and ways of doing things are not peripheral! Respect us and our cultures for what they are." This message, reiterating other authors of this collaborative essay, was stated in many ways. The following was the strongest: "We honor our culture and faith tradition. Teach us how to, and allow us to explore vast bodies of knowledge—but don't take away what we have."

### ***Future Goals***

My belief is that necessary changes in the educational environment will materialize only with the mobilization of an active movement led by educators and students. Raymond Wlodkowski and Margery Ginsberg have outlined practical steps toward implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom (1995, 308). I offer the following as an addendum to their list. Such practices are important for educators who are serious about transforming entire institutions into settings of multicultural understanding where no person is perceived as peripheral.

- Facilitate dialogue and understanding between and among diverse ethnic communities—this dialogue must be open, honest, and willing to test the deep waters;
- Form bonds across multiple boundaries with those perceived as “other”;
- Confront racist laws, policies, faculty members, and institutions—do not deny the reality of racism, but be a force for change;
- Be willing to give up privileged positions of power;
- Discover points of entry into communities different from one’s own;
- Allow everyone to have a voice and every voice to be heard.

These practices are critical for our world to discover and honor the many sacred stories that surround us.

### ***Taking Time: Given the harried schedule of the religious educator. . . Will we find the time?***

*Lynn Bridgers reminds us that our commitment to multicultural education is reflected in how we spend our time.*

As a native of New Mexico, I grew up in a multicultural setting long before it was fashionable to do so. Today, as it was decades ago, the majority of New Mexico’s population is Hispanic. The second largest demographic group is Americans of European decent, people like myself, and the state continues to be home to over 20 distinct Native American cultures. I remember, as a child, being aware that New Mexico was different from the bland American monoculture portrayed on popular television programs and photographed in the pages of glossy magazines. I grew up outside the “white” center that Boyung Lee describes. New Mexico seemed somehow backward, some kind

of colony, the outer reaches of the United States. Years later I realized that New Mexico's racial diversity and multicultural spirit were ahead of their time in relation to other parts of the country.

New Mexico long ago embraced Rainbow Dreams—recognizing the need for inclusiveness in educational institutions that were informed by diverse perspectives and the rich contributions of multiple cultures. By the time I finished high school, I had studied Spanish five years, learning the importance of being multilingual, as Ralph Casas urges. By young adulthood, I could identify the tribe and language group of almost all Native Americans in the state and regularly attended pueblo events. But, whereas public schools and popular culture embraced the need for multicultural education and inclusiveness, the same cannot be said for my religious education.

One hard reality of growing up in New Mexico was coming to terms with how biased and limited my religious education actually was. The Presbyterian Church I attended, the largest in the state, was a bastion of Anglo culture. Its response to the challenge of being truly multicultural was Eisner's famous null curriculum—and what is ignored ceases to have value (1979, 97–100). My church was a setting more like the Anglo neighborhood that Katherine Turpin describes. Every Sunday I sat on red velvet cushions in a cavernous sanctuary devoid of icons, absorbing that valuable Protestant work ethic. But, often as not, Mariachi music drifted across the parking lot from the centuries-old Hispanic community of Martineztown next to the church. By that time, easy access off the interstate meant the pristine members of First Presbyterian Church no longer had to drive through Martineztown on their way to church. Nor do I remember being aware of, or asked to participate in, any social programs that blunted the brutal poverty that many Martineztown residents confronted on a daily basis.

But, a funny thing happened in the course of my religious education. If the goal were to form me as a thoughtful, conscientious adult believer in the Presbyterian Church, I would have to say that it completely failed. After eight years of religious education, I did complete my confirmation classes at fourteen. I then politely refused to be confirmed. Only after several years of religious abstinence was I ready to be confirmed. I guess you could say I went native. I was confirmed not in the Presbyterian Church, but in the Roman Catholic Church. It was actually just a homecoming for my soul.

So how was my Roman Catholic formation achieved? My childhood had no strict Sister Mary Bernard or rigid catechism classes. It was achieved through the pure generosity of spirit of the many

Roman Catholics who surrounded me—through Grandma Gonzales, who taught my sister and me to cook traditional New Mexican cuisine; through members of the old Catholic church at Santa Ana Pueblo, who invited us to come for the dances and stay for the feasting. It came through long hours of sharing in which Roman Catholic cultural values were absorbed through my senses and distilled in my heart. My own faltering steps led me back into the rich traditions that immersed me in the history of my homeland and gave me my own place in that history. Today I teach classes on the 16th-century Spanish spirituality that formed the spirit of Catholic New Mexico.

It is a long road, a very long journey that leads to genuinely appreciating and truly valuing another culture. That pilgrimage is something that cannot be achieved without commitment. Remember that how we spend our time is closely related to what we value. The Protestant church of my youth found only two hours a week to attend to my formation. I never remember a pastor or church elder taking the time to talk to me, to find out who I was or what I believed. Native American and Spanish Catholics surrounded me seven days a week. Religious educators today will find no quick fixes in transforming religious education into a multicultural celebration. No genuine engagement will happen unless we make a real and consistent commitment of time; only through time can relationships truly grow. Veronice Miles recognizes this in her later comments when she cautions against superficial observations and emphasizes the need to create real space for people to express feelings and ideas in diverse ways.

Perhaps nowhere is this need as clear as in the role of mentoring, a point made by Ralph Casas in relation to higher education. Over the last decade, the development of Initial Teacher Training has produced several new volumes and reports on mentoring and the mentoring process (Tomlinson 1995; Anderson and Shannon 1988; Furlong and Maynard 1995; Lievers 2004). Different authors propose different models for mentoring, such as apprenticeship, coaching, or co-inquiry. Anderson and Shannon base their view on the functions a mentor provides. In their view, a good mentor “teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels, and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter’s professional and/or personal development” (Anderson and Shannon 1988, 40).

These activities take time, and in the National Doctoral Program Survey of graduate students conducted in 2000, “Underrepresented Minority” students consistently gave lower scores than Caucasian and Asian students on questions involving mentoring. They were less likely

to be satisfied with the amount or quality of time spent with their advisors and less likely to believe they received “ongoing, constructive feedback” from their advisors (NAGPS, 2001). That dissatisfaction with critical relationships may be a factor in the dropout rate among Latino populations. As Richard Fry, a Senior Research Associate at the Pew Hispanic Center notes, “Latino youth in the United States are more likely to have dropped out of school than other youth” (Fry 2003, 4). It may be a signal that changes are needed.

Changes begin by creating new patterns of relationship in educational institutions, particularly in teacher–student relationships. Larry Braskamp leads a program funded by the Lilly Endowment and the Templeton Foundation that is designed to foster student development by fostering faculty development. Braskamp summarizes “faculty may need to redefine their responsibilities to include an increased importance on their contributions as mentors and role models to student and colleagues, in addition to their traditional roles as teachers, researchers and scholars” (2004, 1). Such findings suggest a reorientation of educational institutions in terms of mission, relationships, and structured use of time.

I believe that the greatest challenge to realizing the long journey of multicultural living, and effective religious education overall, is the sheer busyness of the educational culture we create and sustain in graduate education—cultures of busyness that allow too little time for meaningful interaction, much less mutual education. Another soul who “went native” in the rugged landscape of New Mexico, celebrated artist Georgia O’Keefe, understood this. Her famous paintings of flowers were unusual, she once observed, only because she took the time to see them, and “nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven’t time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time” (Benke 2001, 31). If we think back on our schedules over any given week in the academic arena, most of us will see and acknowledge the problem. Given the harried schedule that has become normative for the religious educator in the 21st century . . . will we find the time?

***Entering Deep Waters: To embrace the promises of knowledge, transformation, and justice, we need to honor the stories and experiences of others with whom we co-journey***

*Veronice Miles leads the last leg of our journey, offering perspectives on how to educate in multicultural context, inviting others to enter the deep waters of diversity.*

For the past six years, I have worked with the Youth Theological Initiative's (YTI) Summer Academy. Fifty-four rising high school seniors, and 26 staff from various ethnic and social contexts gather for a month at Emory University to explore relations among theology, social justice, and public issues. Helping youth discern their theological voices and inviting them to speak are central to YTI's goal of "enabl[ing] both the church and society to recognize youth as theologically capable and insightful contributors to church and culture" (White 2004). Our intent is for YTI youth to explore public issues in a multicultural context, engage in diverse practices of faith, and gather tools to analyze and think theologically about the world.

As *co-journeers* with these exceptional young people, the YTI staff commits to live in community, engage in critical dialogue, and open themselves to transformation. Thus, they accept the invitation to explore their theological commitments and to reflect on educational content and process in the academy and communities of faith. They wrestle with large questions: How God is involved in a world where suffering abounds; how theology relates with the *isms* woven into our social fabric; and what responsibilities rest with persons of faith—to accommodate, resist, or challenge the social order. These questions often lead to deep waters where people try to swim together—to honor stories and experiences of fellow *co-journeers* and to recognize how human stories interrelate, both positively and negatively. The stories inevitably reveal that one person's celebration can be another's grief.

One such deep-water experience was a conversation among YTI staff, prior to the 2003 Summer Academy, about the significance of celebrating the Fourth of July. We struggled with questions of: why or why not, how, and what if. We reflected on what it meant for us to grapple with these questions in a multicultural context with people committed to critical theological dialogue about public issues. This was not the first year that the question had been raised, but this was the year when we were committed and able to work with the questions in depth—to share our stories with each other and to discern a collegial response. I call this a deep-water experience because, in addition to the symbolic significance of July Fourth in the United States, the 2003 conversation emerged in a context of hyper-patriotism, national sensitivity, and a cry from national leaders that violence was imminent. The September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were still fresh on people's minds, and the newly initiated war with Iraq touched families of some of our YTI staff and scholars (youth). In addition, our team was faced with diverse historical accounts, inadequate

information on the present situation, and our own separate histories and experiences regarding the significance of the Fourth of July.

Being committed to diversity and dialogical education are not the same as creating a multicultural environment, as Katherine Turpin argues. Multiculturalism emerges uniquely in each situation as people engage in dialogue and open to the inevitable transformation. According to Paulo Freire, “dialogue is the encounter between [persons], mediated by the world, in order to name the world.” He cautions that “dialogue cannot occur between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied” (1999, 69). In YTI, we became aware that naming our world was no simple task, especially when our stories challenged each other. Our dialogue surfaced uncomfortable questions about whose history to rehearse, how inclusion and exclusion are practiced, and who can and cannot speak and be heard. At the same time, our sharing of family stories, challenges, joys, and sorrows spoke to us as *sacred texts*. Powerful stories emerged from waters that had covered them in the past—waters swelling with fear, woundedness, a desire for unity, and less demanding forms of diversity.

Two *generative cultural themes* inhibit dialogue and social re-creation (Freire 1999). The first is *silence* or *voicelessness*, often experienced by people on the margins of so-called mainstream culture—persons of color, women, youth, and others. Silence supports the status quo by limiting their power to interrogate social and political realities, their “capacity to pose questions to the world” (Greene 1988, 21). In response to these limitations, Maxine Greene proposes an authentic public sphere in which diverse voices gather to explore alternative ways of being in the world, “to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (3). In her view, the power to *name* or *shape* reality is no longer limited to those in the presumed center; it emerges from a commitment to dialogical reflection among people in a multicentered context, similar to that called forth by Boyung Lee. Similarly, Maria Harris accents the vital contributions of those who have been silenced—women and other marginalized persons: “From their long sojourn in the country of the strange, outsiders know an uncharted territory of human existence. Outsiders bring an entirely different angle of vision. . . . Outsiders provoke re-creation” (1987, 99).

The second generative theme that emerged is *sameness*, or the *collapse of difference*, as a means of maintaining the status quo, limiting our capacity for critical dialogue, and inhibiting re-creation. The YTI conversation invited persons to break silence, and to bring the



complexity of their experiences to bear on the present moment, challenging the presumption that all Americans share the *same* commitments, attitudes, and perception of reality. This deep-water experience revealed that we had not all “agreed on what is” (Boyung Lee’s point) and challenged us not only to anticipate, but also to welcome our diverse opinions.

This suggests the need for new forms of dialogue, recognizing what Patricia Hill Collins describes as our tendency toward binary thinking, or defining difference in oppositional terms, assuming that one part “is inherently opposed to its ‘other’” (2000, 70). Reification of this binary system creates a hierarchy in which the subordinate part of the binary is objectified and thwarted from full participation in naming and re-creating the world. Objectification and domination “invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender and class oppression” and shape public policy (Collins 2000, 71). We may be tempted to believe that the antidote for oppositional conceptions of difference is to embrace *sameness* as a guiding principle. I argue that sameness suggests a raceless, classless, genderless, *less-than-who-I-am* understanding of reality, which negates the particularity of human experience, gifts, and passions. Sameness demands acquiescence or accommodation to what is considered culturally acceptable or normative, limiting our ability to image other ways of being.

In the YTI discussion of the Fourth of July, we discovered the beauty and fearfulness of our differences as we stood together in this potentially deconstructive moment. We chose not to deny difference. Our decision aligned with Patricia Williams’s resistance to so-called color-blindness: “creating community . . . involves this most difficult work of negotiating real divisions, of considering boundaries before we go crashing through, and of pondering our differences before we can ever agree on the terms of our sameness” (1997, 6). Indeed, the YTI staff dialogue was so powerful that we continued it with the young scholars who joined us in July, convinced they also had a story to tell. Without detailing the discussion or outcome, the YTI dialogue shapes my closing comments regarding realities, visions, and promises of a multicultural future—educating so people dare to enter deep waters.

1. **Vision:** *Intentionally creating spaces for story sharing.* The YTI conversation required the staff, and eventually the youth, to make time to tell their stories and hear others’ stories. The community learned to hear *everyone’s* voice, to hold sacred what each

contributed, and to honor others in our responses, whether agreeing, disagreeing, or wondering about others' experiences and perspectives. This discovery reinforces Lynn Bridgers's insights about taking time.

2. **Reality:** *True dialogue undermined by superficial or judgmental observations or opting out of conversation.* The YTI staff discovered that speaking and hearing entails risk and demands courage. Our dialogue deepened when people risked telling their stories and sharing what was important to them. This challenged people to continue in dialogue, even when it was uncomfortable.
3. **Reality and Promise:** *Creating spaces for people to express feelings and ideas in diverse ways.* The staff discovered strong feelings regarding the Fourth of July. People needed time and space to engage those feelings. We discovered that shedding tears could be cleansing and could also open a path toward common ground. Further, we discovered the need to express ourselves in multiple ways, including artistic expression through painting, poetry, and quilting.
4. **Promise:** *Allowing new knowledge to emerge in the process of telling and hearing.* At times, the staff realized that they had erroneously assumed differences or similarities. Further, some of their insights could not be adequately expressed in common vernacular, so they worked together to express themselves in new ways, which led to further research and dialogue over time.
5. **Promise:** *Creating and welcoming opportunities for transformation.* In the case, the staff learned from their colleagues, the youth, and themselves. By opening our conversations to unexpected turns, and by accepting opportunities that emerged spontaneously, we were all changed.
6. **Reality and Promise:** *Potential of multicultural education in challenging assumptions and offering opportunities for people to participate in creating a just world—one where all persons can receive and contribute to the well being and harmony of creation—the Shalom of God.* Educational communities and events can contribute to this creative work, whatever the shape, duration, and complexity of the community or activity.

These realities and promises do not exhaust what could be said, even from the YTI case study; they do suggest directions for religious and educational communities, and they challenge religious educators to lead toward a brave new world.

## FINDING COURAGE AND ENTERING ADVENTURE

The approaches we have taken in this article are personal, engaged with the literature, and engaged with others through interviews and observations. These stories and perspectives are only partial, however. No single group of individuals can project a multicultural future; this is a work of the entire community. We have tried to engage some of the hard realities that religious educators will have to face on the ongoing journey. We have also looked into those realities for the (sometimes hidden) seeds of vision and promise. The challenge before religious educators now is to find courage to dream dreams and develop next steps. In this article we have proposed some visions and practices, but the adventure really begins when our ideas join with others and move religious educators toward a future that mirrors the courage and delight of the Religious Education Association's past. Such an adventure will hopefully transform religious education into a culturally rich, trans-cultural, many-cultured, multicultural community that we can only glimpse today.

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Boyung Lee is Assistant Professor of Educational Ministries at Pacific School of Religion, and has focused her research on Confucian tradition and post-colonialism as sources for reshaping religious education. E-mail: blee@psr.edu

Katherine Turpin is Assistant Professor of Religious Education at Iliff School of Theology, and has focused her recent research on consumer culture and adolescent vocational imagination. E-mail: KTurpin@iliff.edu

Ralph Casas is Associate Professor of Pharmacy Technology, and Faculty Coordinator of Project HOPE (Health Opportunities and Pipeline to Education), Cerritos College, California. His research focuses on indigenous religious and educational traditions as sources for religious education and health. E-mail: RCASAS@aol.com

Lynn Bridgers is Assistant Professor of Theology at Spring Hill College, where she brings her interests in transformational experience, spiritual practice, and trauma into her teaching and spiritual guidance. E-mail: l.bridgers@worldnet.att.net

Veronice Miles is a Ph.D. student in religious education and homiletics, and Residential Mentor Coordinator for the Youth Theological Initiative's Summer Academy, Emory University. Her research focuses on pedagogies of hope and liberation in African American communities. E-mail: vmiles@learnlink.emory.edu

Mary Elizabeth Moore is Professor of Religion and Education at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and Director of Women in Theology and Ministry. Her research interests focus on education toward *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world. E-mail: mmoore3@emory.edu

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