

Sacred Heart University

From the Selected Works of June-Ann Greeley

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Professor June-Ann Greeley

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Sacred Heart University Professor June-Ann Greeley recently returned from a week-long seminar at Boston College that focused on ways of thinking about religion in the public square. Greeley was one of just 25 selected from around the country to participate in this groundbreaking seminar that was a collaboration of Boston College, the Council of Independent Colleges and the Interfaith Youth Council.

Greeley says a significant component of the seminar was the agreement that there is a critical need for an interfaith dialogue in the public square. “It’s the 21st century. We will all meet people of various faiths—or none at all—in our communities, our schools, our places of work and in our neighborhoods, and we need to engage with them meaningfully and honestly. That means being able to engage others in their faith traditions in a way that goes beyond just tolerance to a deeper appreciation for religious understanding,” she says.

“Our charge was to find ways to think about, talk about and develop curricula for our students in our respective colleges and universities that address authentic comparative theologies and interfaith dialogue. That curriculum development would also address ways of learning how to sustain community and fellowship while also sometimes disagreeing on significant issues of belief,” she adds.

She says most of the attendees were professors of religious studies or theology, but there were some from other disciplines, such as sociology, history and art history. There was also a variety of religions and areas of the country represented.

Participants met in classes and small groups and also made site visits to the Islamic Center of Boston and a Hindu temple/school. “We had talked about engaging in the practice of other religions, so we went to a Hindu devotion session and shared a meal and conversation,” Greeley says.

“The hope is that this project will help us develop ways of deepening interfaith understanding,” says Greeley, who would like to develop a new course on Christian-Jewish-Islamic understanding that would look at where real interfaith dialogue can take place. “The course could cover what those faiths believe and why they believe it. It would help students understand that just because there are differences in their beliefs, there may also be common ground,” she said. “For example, there is a common belief in the one God, the God of all three monotheistic faiths, but there are some differences in how each tradition articulates and defines that belief. Exploring the differences as well as similarities, and why that is important, becomes a task for educators.” She would also like to look into being part of a revival of SHU’s Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding with an Islamic component added.

She says the attendees agreed on the importance of moving away from just tolerance and getting to real understanding—something that was extremely important to the young members of the Interfaith Youth Council. “We need to understand the importance of not making our differences a roadblock to engagement. We want to get away from the idea that you can’t talk about religion. We should be able to talk about important issues without resorting to argument, violence or shutting down.”