SEEKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY
MODULE 5 – LECTURE 5.2
SEATTLE UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

TITLE: ARTFUL PRACTICE

We've taken this journey together, through these five modules and ten lectures. We have learned to consider religious literacy as an invitation to become more aware of worldviews with a degree of personal openness, respect, curiosity, and wonder. Our journey is more art than science, a process like that of learning a skill or craft – like holding a brush to canvas and seeing how others have done the same. Becoming an artful practitioner takes time, so be patient. It can be an inspiring journey.

Where would you go from here if you wished to continue the journey to become an artful practitioner? If you are enthusiastic, you might move from a time of study to engaging others in your community or region who are formed by worldviews other than your own, and in this way become more steeped in interreligious engagement. The act of interreligious engagement – and becoming more involved in your context – is also an artful practice, and you get better at it as you go along. Here are some recommendations to get you started:

First, aim to maintain, and then expand, your newly acquired multireligious literacy.
Time and again, this course emphasized that words and ideas matter. Together, we introduced or facilitated review of dozens of religion-specific names, terms, concepts, and phrases. Artful practitioners of interreligious engagement make an effort to internalize and use this rich skillset. They agree that making correct use of a religious worldview and its community's names, for instance, is one way to demonstrate respect.

Second, join a local interfaith organization in your area, or consider starting a culturally and religiously diverse affinity group in your place of employment. In organizational life you will experience natural places to engage in conversation, ask questions, invite clarification, and experience others. Artful practice in interreligious engagement takes time, patience, and strategy. And yet it is also rewarding because, like others, you will be doing your part in organized society

to invite awareness and healing rather than sewing division and fostering continued woundedness.

Let's review for a moment: An artful assessment of this course's words, themes, concepts, and phrases begins with the term religion itself. During this course, we learned that the very object of our study – religion – is a difficult term to define. It has no commonly agreed-upon definition. Because religion is hard to pin down, artful practitioners of interreligious engagement offer some alternatives. Worldview is a popular option. And yet, worldview is still an imperfect description since, as one critic notes, the word gives pride of place to the visual – a view – and we know that religious ritual and practice are certainly multisensory. Synonyms like life-stance or lifeway might be better expressions. And yet, whatever religion is, we witness interreligious collaboration around the world all the time. This is our third point: Artful interreligious engagement can indeed occur between people who do not see religion quite the same way.

We said it in the first module, so it bears repeating here as a fourth point around being an artful practitioner of religious engagement: Start with real people. Interreligious engagement is more artful when it starts, not with the category religion (whatever we mean by that word)—but rather, with real human beings. Lived Religion is a popular approach that shines a light on the everyday lives of individuals and communities and not abstract teaching. Advocates of the Lived Religion approach point out that religion scholars and official leaders may provide information about how the adherents of a certain religion should live; but they do not necessarily give us accurate information about how adherents of a particular religion actually express their faith. Interreligious engagement is more artful when participants have the capacity to hear from local voices, who live their stories every day.

And fifth, consider the objects that define people's everyday lives. This approach – often called Material Religion is a valuable method for continued learning by anyone who values artful interreligious engagement. Advocates of the Material Religion approach assert that only by studying objects—things—can we fully understand what religion is.

For an example of the material religion approach in action, let us turn to S. Brent Plate and his book, A History of Religion in Five and a half Objects (2014). Plate walks us through the history of the human use of five things: stones, incense, drums, crosses, and bread. He wants us

to take a multi-sensory journey by using only five objects across time. Fascinating. Material Religion thus engages all five senses. It poses questions like “What is the sound and cadence of the sacred in a drum over a thousand years?”

As we study objects, Plate says, we become aware of the lessons they teach about the divine and human relationship. After a while, we adjust our artful gaze to see how stones perform ritual functions for millennia; that incense can trigger emotions from childhood; that a cross has multiple meanings across cultures; that bread is always “deeply complex and full of wonder;” that drumbeats are an archetypal symbol of the beating human heart and the limit of finitude. Plate states: “We cannot study drums without knowing something about religion, and...vice versa.” He may well be right!

A sixth point: As we consider our time together, we may agree that religious literacy, and becoming an artful practitioner of religious engagement has less to do with command of information and much more to do with a commitment to approach religious variety with an open heart and an open mind.

There are so many methods for the applied and artful practice of religious engagement, many of which we’ve touched on during this course. As you move beyond this course and engage with others, we encourage you to use appreciative knowledge, avoid sweeping generalizations, be savvy about your sources of information, compare worldviews carefully, and practice the skill of disagreeing respectfully.

There is one last item that is difficult to ascend beyond as a final suggestion: Make room in your lives for “holy envy.” The phrase comes from a great 20th-century scholar named Krister Stendahl. What he meant was this: Allow yourself to find something (a belief; a ritual, a tradition, an idea) to admire in other people’s lifeways—even to the point of wishing that it could be yours. But then don't try to own it, or co-opt it, but, yes, admire it as a gem you see in another worldview but perhaps not in your own. Holy Envy. The ability to love a truth with self-restraint. This is a hallmark of interreligious engagement practiced artfully.

Thank you - for your time, your attention, and your participation, and for joining us along this way.