

# Interreligious Learning in Civic Spaces

By Carrie Sealine

Bill Zangeneh-Lester and other GTU students and alumni are working to expand religious understanding among the diverse populations at a local community college.

**B**ILL ZANGENEH-LESTER IS A MAN WITH A MISSION: a mission to bring the GTU's model of interreligious and interdisciplinary engagement to the 30,000 students at American River College (ARC), a community college in Sacramento. Even as he completes his GTU dissertation on the topic of interreligious learning in civic spaces, Zangeneh-Lester is already putting this scholarship into action as chair of the Department of Humanities and Religious Studies and director of the Honors Program at ARC, where he has taught since 2015. In the process, Zangeneh-Lester is furthering the impact of the GTU's work to expand interreligious dialogue and understanding, while also creating a path for other GTU students and recent graduates to teach in this culturally diverse college community.

Understanding the central role that religion has played in shaping culture and history around the globe, Zangeneh-Lester has invited GTU PhD students and MA graduates with diverse religious and scholarly backgrounds to teach classes in the humanities, give guest lectures, and participate in panel discussions at American River College. The impact of the GTU scholars' presence at ARC extends beyond the students in their courses. For example, when the Muslim student group on campus organized a panel discussion, "A Bigger Table: Abraham and Hospitality," GTU doctoral student Susan Aguilar (Historical and Cultural Studies

of Religion, Center for Jewish Studies) and graduate Daniel London (PhD '17, Christian Spirituality) joined Zangeneh-Lester and a local imam to discuss the commonalities of the Abrahamic faith traditions before a packed room. In addition to Zangeneh-Lester, Aguilar, and London, three other scholars from the GTU have taught classes at ARC: Rania Shah (MA '16, Center for Islamic Studies), Cogen Bohanec (doctoral student with the Center for Dharma Studies), and Daniel Mocerri (doctoral student in Interdisciplinary Studies).

As department chair, Zangeneh-Lester has created and grown a program at ARC that recognizes the significance of the world's religions in shaping the humanities, at a time when programs in religious studies are being closed or cut at other colleges and universities. With 55 percent of all current undergraduates in the U.S. attending community colleges, the program could also build valuable connections to the GTU in terms of future recruitment. "Students go on to Stanford, Columbia, and Yale after attending ARC," Zangeneh-Lester said. "Why not the GTU?"

Zangeneh-Lester himself is a product of community college, having attended Sierra Community College in Rocklin, CA. He pursued his teaching at American River College with the support of his GTU advisors Fr. Eddie Fernandez (GTU/Jesuit School of Theology) and the late Ibrahim Farajajé (GTU/Starr King School of

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(l-r) The GTU’s Bill Zangeneh-Lester, Susan Aguilar, and Daniel London joined a local imam for an interreligious panel at American River College

the Ministry). “There’s no such thing as a standard path in the community college world,” he said. “At ARC, over half of the students are the first generation in their families to attend college; 60 percent are from historically underserved and underrepresented groups, mostly working-class folks.”

“The students at ARC are varied in terms of age, ethnicity, and religious background, but they are all very interested and curious to learn, receptive, and responsive,” said Susan Aguilar, who taught “Introduction to World Religions” at ARC as a summer intensive and is teaching it again this semester. “You’re not just teaching fact-based content, but religious literacy. You really get the opportunity to foster interreligious dialogue, to think critically about what you see in the media and become an educated and informed member of the community. This fosters respect and curiosity about other faith traditions.”

One of four colleges that make up the Los Rios Community College District, American River College is home to a diverse student community. Students come from all over the globe and from many cultures and faith traditions. The local area includes the largest group of Afghani refugees in the country, as well as many Russian Protestants. Other than English, the most common languages heard on Los Rios campuses

are, in this order, Urdu (Pakistan), Farsi (Afghanistan and Iran), Arabic, Russian, and Spanish. No matter where their students came from or what, if any, religion they practice, Zangeneh-Lester and his colleagues from the GTU see firsthand the huge need for education that enhances interreligious understanding.

Daniel Mocerri believes religious literacy is particularly important in the current political environment. Mocerri acknowledges the sensitivity required to be an effective educator in the ARC community. “Alongside the more ‘conventional’ recent high-school graduates, we also have students from populations that are typically underserved: combat veterans, those returning from incarceration, recent immigrants, displaced workers, along with working adults from lower socioeconomic locations seeking professional advancement,” he said. “Bill [Zangeneh-Lester] understands these complexities and values innovative pedagogy, diverse viewpoints, and the creation of a safe classroom environment. As someone who is very concerned with justice issues around identity, I am grateful to be teaching at ARC and hope that my work contributes towards increasing harmonious and compassionate relations.”

Zangeneh-Lester believes the presence of GTU scholars who are deeply rooted in their own religious and cultural traditions encourages students to come to terms with their own religious backgrounds. “Young



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*GTU doctoral student, on teaching at American River College*

people have religious identities, yet students often feel they have to conceal these identities in secular spaces,” said Zangeneh-Lester. “An African-American woman student told me she had pretended to be an atheist because she didn’t realize that a person of faith could be a scholar. A Jewish student told me he felt he had to hide his Jewish identity from his peers. An atheist white student thought he should present himself as a Christian because his atheism was so strongly rejected by his family; he feared his colleagues or instructors would react as his family members did. The common denominator is that everybody feels they need to pretend to be what they’re not. By creating a space where religious identities are explicitly included in dialogues, the personhood of the student can come forward in our classrooms.”

He continued, “The country is fearful; for many identities this is an oppressive time politically. People are suffering quite a lot. Serving historically underserved populations in the spirit of social justice can be a practice of spirituality. We are reaching out to people who are frequently excluded in the education process. As Americans we have a responsibility to learn about religious diversity and to understand that religious identity is often misrepresented in the media. One of my Muslim students told me, ‘I have to hold the door open for other students and look them in the eyes and smile to reassure them that I am not a terrorist.’ ”

A 2016 MA graduate with the GTU’s Center for Islamic Studies, Rania Shah said that putting together her course on “Humanities of the Middle East” was a fascinating learning project. “I had never before put all the pieces together, but the faculty at the GTU and at UC Berkeley (where Shah is now an undergraduate student

advisor in the department of Near Eastern Studies) were all very supportive.” She continued, “You might think that seeing the history of the Ancient Near East come together might make you more secular, but it has strengthened my faith. Literature, written language, architecture, and art all began in what is now Iraq: Babylon and Persia. The stories of Gilgamesh and the flood are five thousand years old and shared throughout the Abrahamic religions. Even the earliest forms of Orientalism come from here, as the Greeks wrote about their encounters with these ‘exotic’ civilizations.”

Shah finds teaching nineteen-year-olds to be enjoyable and entertaining. She takes full advantage of the digital classroom to bring the ancient world alive for her students. An experienced early childhood and elementary teacher, Shah understands that it is important for students whose families come from the Near East—as well as those who don’t—to appreciate the region and its contributions to history. (Her own family comes from Pakistan.) Shah, whose MA work at the GTU focused on Islamophobia (a topic she addressed in a talk at ARC), is excited to be part of the academic community in Sacramento, her hometown. “I love being able to tie all the history together into how religion developed in the Middle East, especially now that so many places in the ‘Cradle of Civilization’ have been destroyed.”

**M**any ARC students report that Zangeneh-Lester and his GTU colleagues are among the first people they’ve encountered with academic backgrounds. Zangeneh-Lester takes full advantage of this opportunity by structuring the program so that the ARC classroom looks and feels like a GTU classroom in many ways.

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— Rania Shah (MA, '16)  
on teaching “Humanities of the Middle East” at ARC



“We read, talk, and discuss Talal Asad, bell hooks, Diana Eck, Diane Moore, Eboo Patel, Stephen Prothero, Paolo Freire, and Judith Berling. Once you hear it, you can’t unhear it. When students hear what the GTU has to offer, that’s the basis for some serious change—and some serious validation for our religiously diverse students.”

Daniel London felt that the panel discussion on the Abrahamic faiths was publication worthy. “The event was well attended,” he said. “The students and community asked engaging questions, and it was a pleasure and privilege to participate with Bill and Susan as well as Muslim clergy colleagues.” London, who recently accepted a pastoral position at Christ Episcopal Church in Eureka, CA, reports that the evening included the uncomfortable but rewarding experience of having his perspective challenged by a Muslim leader. While such interactions may be difficult, London recognizes that true interreligious dialogue demands an openness to learning from one another and having our own perspectives challenged.

PhD student Cogen Bohanec is teaching a class at ARC on Humanities of Religions of Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia—in other words, the dharmic traditions. Before beginning his doctoral work in coordination with the Mira & Ajay Shingal Center for Dharma Studies at the GTU, Bohanec earned a degree at the Institute of Buddhist Studies, a GTU affiliate. Like Zangeneh-Lester, Bohanec is a community college graduate, but says he struggled to study religion through history in the absence of classes in religious studies. “It’s great,” he said, “that the hybrid GTU culture, which has no taboo against the emic (inside) perspective, is foundational to ARC’s really interesting program. I’m

able to present the traditions in a way that people from those traditions would recognize and approve.”

Bohanec values the GTU’s academic atmosphere for the unique way in which it holds the paradox of epistemological pragmatism, by challenging the idea that the etic (outside) perspective provides the only effective mode of understanding. He observed, “Bringing the radical epistemology of the GTU to the grass-roots level institutional setting promotes dialogic understanding of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other dharma traditions. Mondays start off dragging, but the students are excited by the end of the day.”

Can interreligious learning happen in public spaces commonly defined as “secular”? Bill Zangeneh-Lester believes that it can: “When I tell a student at ARC that I go to the GTU, it opens the door to further conversation. It provides an opportunity for students to take ownership of their own religious identities in conversations with me.” He sees the role of encouraging religious literacy as essential in today’s culture: “The goal is not to erase fundamental differences so we can all hold hands and sing “It’s a Small World (After All)”; rather, this work is a commitment to promoting a culture of engaged civic pluralism and mutual respect, in which people can work together, in the fullness of their identities, across the reality of their differences, for the common good.” ♦

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