

Pathways to an Interreligious Future

On the eve of his inauguration as president, Rabbi Daniel Lehmann shares his vision for advancing the GTU as a leading laboratory for interreligious life and learning.

By Rabbi Daniel L. Lehmann

The Graduate Theological Union is a truly global, multireligious community of scholars, learners, and leaders. Our students, faculty, and campus community come together from many diverse cultures and faith traditions. We are people who share a commitment to both rigorous scholarship and deep religious engagement. For me, the opportunity to lead an institution that was already widely recognized as the foremost destination for interreligious education and dialogue was one of the most attractive aspects of becoming the GTU's president.

But the GTU is much more than just a gathering place for people of different faiths and backgrounds. I see the GTU as the leading laboratory and platform for energetic participation in interreligious life and learning.

The religious and cultural diversity at the GTU is undeniable, and we celebrate that. Still, diversity is just a starting point. It takes work to build a pluralistic community that encourages respectful dialogue and creates opportunities both to celebrate commonalities and to engage in serious conversations about difference. True pluralism requires intentional exchange with others, and that's what we foster at the GTU. It demands a commitment to particularity and an openness to listening, a willingness to share our own truth and a desire to learn from the perspectives of those with whom we may disagree.

One of my top priorities as president is to continue to build a GTU culture in which every voice is valued and respected—an environment where trust and open inquiry allow us to introduce differing points of view. In order to live out such a vision, the many people involved and invested in this multireligious community must continue to hold onto the unique identities and commitments that make each of us distinctive. We do not ask any member of our community to leave their beliefs at the door. The encounter of these deeply held commitments is what makes true interreligious dialogue fruitful.

As president, one of my hopes is that the GTU will serve as an incubator where interreligious scholar-innovators can find inspiration, start new projects, and launch



groundbreaking ideas through participation in the GTU's unique brand of pluralism in practice. In addition to scholarly projects, the work we do in building a community that can engage difference creatively can be a model for a deeply polarized world.

Across all strata of society and realms of civic engagement—from politics, to religion, to race and beyond—discourse has become increasingly factious. Many view religion as a primary cause of our cultural discourse of division. But I believe that religion, when shaped by a commitment to pluralism, can also be a powerful source of healing and hope.

In this cultural climate, a new moment presents itself: a moment to innovate *new* democratic models that are strengthened through curious, courageous engagement with divergences in opinion, persuasion, or



President Lehmann hosts a meeting with doctoral students in his office.

belief. As president, I hope to continue to build a GTU that will educate and empower scholars, leaders, and activists to apply deep and sophisticated interreligious learning to our contemporary challenges and opportunities.

Advancing Professional Opportunities through Applied Interreligious Engagement

As the GTU advances into a new era, we are actively developing programs and resources that draw upon and apply our unique set of multireligious and interdisciplinary academic strengths to modern-day professional contexts and contemporary issues. With these new offerings, we offer a model that equips leaders to address the ethical, organizational, and spiritual challenges they face in a variety of corporate and nonprofit ventures.

As a start, we are initiating several new programs and expanding existing ones that seek to empower working professionals to apply the insights of GTU scholarship in creatively addressing contemporary needs. These applied programs offer exceptional opportunities for expanded partnerships with professional and nonprofit organizations that understand the critical role the wisdom of religious teaching can offer in addressing contemporary needs. Let me offer just a few examples of these new directions.

We are in the final stages of developing an innovative interreligious chaplaincy program that is the first of its kind, offering students the opportunity to gain chaplaincy certi-

fication with both specific interreligious training as well as specialized training in Islamic, Jewish, or Hindu chaplaincy through a focused master's degree from our Centers of Islamic, Jewish, or Dharma Studies. This new chaplaincy program, which we expect will welcome its first group of students next fall, will provide the practical skills necessary to offer spiritual care in environments of great spiritual and religious diversity, while also grounding each student in a specific tradition that has been underrepresented among institutional chaplains. (Read more about this program on page 9.)

We are also planning a new online graduate certificate in interreligious studies designed to attract working professionals in a wide variety of fields. As the first fully online program to be offered by the GTU, this graduate certificate is tailored to meet the needs of today's professionals across a variety of sectors including healthcare, nonprofit management, social services, public policy, education, and business. Leaders in these fields recognize that today's increasingly diverse workplace environment—and the global culture at large—requires new approaches to cultivating sensitivity and inclusive practices as well as forward-thinking strategies that effectively incorporate multiple perspectives.

In addition, we are expanding our Sustainability 360 program, a collaborative multireligious and multidisciplinary initiative that brings the academic study of religion into conversation with ecology, economics, social ethics and other disciplines in the rapidly growing field of Sustainability Studies. The GTU understands that the deep wisdom of

the world's religious traditions can play a part in addressing climate change and other contemporary challenges. Our current initiatives include the development of a new graduate certificate in Sustainability Studies, as well as the convening of *Sustainable Societies II*, a global conference at the GTU that will bring together an international collection of scholars and experts from diverse faith traditions and academic disciplines in the broad field of sustainability.

Equipping interreligious scholar-leaders to meet contemporary needs—whether it be around spiritual care and chaplaincy, environmental, economic and socially sustainable living, or navigating the complexities of religious and cultural diversity in the workplace and the larger culture—is at the very heart of what we do here at the GTU. The GTU is poised to enhance its capacity to respond to the most serious challenges of our time. Our intellectual and spiritual resources will be deployed in new ways as we engage the diverse and complex needs of our increasingly pluralistic world.

Facilitating the Interreligious Spiritual Quest

In addition, I view the GTU as a collaborative space where scholars and seekers from across a broad spectrum of belief and spiritual expression can engage one another in exploring religious and spiritual practice in its various forms. The GTU is a studio for interreligious scholar-seekers to collaborate, connect, shape, and reshape creative expressions of a life lived with commitment to meaning-making. Through retreats, festivals, workshops, community courses, exhibitions and events, the wide variety of spiritual worldviews is brought into generative dialogue.

As a pluralistic, interreligious laboratory, the GTU is uniquely positioned to offer opportunities to explore spirituality and meaning both within and beyond institutional contexts, providing an opportunity to question, to try on ideas, and to make connections with history, tradition, and community. Rather than discouraging scrutiny of accepted ideas or established traditions, we believe challenging the status quo increases understanding.

With its rich resources in religious thought, the GTU offers a bridge between contemporary spiritual inquiry and established religious traditions. Explorers have the opportunity to examine concepts across time, geography, and cultural contexts, where they may uncover patterns of transformation that infuse traditions and follow common threads that lead to understanding and meaning. Through engagement with multiple worldviews, scholar-seekers may also discover innovative ways of thinking about their own spiritual truth.

Our Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS) and Center for Religion and the Arts (CARE) are not just hubs of interdisciplinary inquiry where religious thought is brought into creative conversation with “secular” fields. At the GTU we recognize that areas like the arts and



the natural sciences are themselves pathways to deeper spiritual understanding, in ways that may fall outside the bounds of established religious tradition. Last month's sacred world music festival, ResoNation, hosted by CARE in cooperation with several member schools and GTU centers, was a celebration not just of the diverse music stemming from numerous religious traditions, but a witness to the power of music itself as a pathway to the Divine. And through efforts like its renowned “Science and the Spiritual Quest” program, CTNS continues to explore ways in which science itself can be a spiritual experience.

The GTU is also a platform from which students can apply the principles of spiritual thinking to the real world. We are offering several new programs that will provide a launch pad for those who seek a vocation in the key areas of wellness, sustainability, and meaning-making. For instance, the GTU is now the only institution offering a graduate degree in Yoga Studies, giving students a foundation to build a life around sharing this essential spiritual practice.

Wherever the spiritually curious find themselves on the quest for interreligious understanding, the invitation is open to consider GTU as a laboratory for authentic spiritual exploration and the chance to make positive change.

A Global Network of Interreligious Scholarship and Leadership

To fulfill its true potential as an international leader and hub of interreligious education and dialogue, the GTU must continue to extend its reach to the global community. Be-

yond serving as a resource for its diverse campus community and broader network of local affiliates, it must embrace a “borderless” and “boundary-less” approach to interreligious learning, forging international partnerships and providing online entry points to our vast scholarly resources so the GTU can reach and serve audiences worldwide.

Our campus is already a rich, educational meeting ground where interreligious and international scholar-explorers gather, share wisdom, learn from one another, and mutually inspire new directions in service and scholarship for the greater good. From my very first days as president, I have felt blessed to be part of a community where so many diverse cultures, nations, and religions come together. The international nature of the GTU can be seen in our doctoral program, for example, which currently includes citizens of nearly twenty different nations. The percentage of international students continues to increase; half of this year’s entering doctoral class were international students, including a scholar who is the first person from her Lahu tribe in Myanmar to enter

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a PhD program. We know many of these educators, leaders, and activists will return to their homelands and employ their GTU education to serve the communities there, like so many GTU alumni before them.

But to really extend the GTU’s international influence, we must more fully embrace the digital age, increasingly moving beyond just brick-and-mortar learning to employ global communication technologies and online programming. We must invest heavily in developing digital degree and certificate programs, online educational events and resources, and other digital outreach that can serve communities outside our borders. Our location near the technological hub of the Silicon Valley positions the GTU well for such growth. But fully implementing such a vision will require building on institutional connections here and abroad,

including our existing cooperative relationship with the University of California, Berkeley, and the schools and universities within the GTU consortium, as well as expanding our network of international partnerships.

During the first year of my presidency, I’ve had opportunity to travel internationally to get to know better some of the communities the GTU serves, and to discuss collaborative possibilities with leaders in those communities, including many prestigious GTU alumni. Dean Uriah Kim and I spent a week in Korea earlier this year, where we not only had dinner with 15 GTU alumni who are professors, pastors, and leaders in universities, seminaries, and churches across Korea, but also engaged in numerous creative conversations about developing more intentional and thoughtful partnerships between the GTU and Korean institutions. I had similar experiences on visits to Hong Kong, as well as in India, where I spent a weekend at the ISKCON Govardhan Eco-Village discussing partnership possibilities with its visionary leader Radhanath Swami, as well as with leaders at the Center for Peace Research at Baranas Hindu University in Varanasi. These trips were inspirational—but they represent the mere starting point for innovative new partnerships the GTU aspires to establish and grow.

As president, one of my goals is to position the GTU to continue to expand its partnerships with local industries, nonprofits, and universities that have established the Bay Area as a global thought leader, and to go beyond our immediate environs by increasing collaboration with universities, institutes, and initiatives worldwide. Through such efforts we can further expand the reach of the GTU’s innovative approach to interreligious and interdisciplinary learning and leadership. ♦

Rabbi Daniel L. Lehmann is the eighth president of the Graduate Theological Union.

Online Certificate in Interreligious Studies, Starting Fall 2020

The GTU is pleased to announce a new online graduate-level Certificate in Interreligious Studies—the first fully online program offered by the GTU. Building on the GTU’s long-established leadership in interreligious scholarship and teaching, this certificate will expand the school’s academic programs to reach prospective students wherever they may live or work.

This certificate is tailored to meet the needs of today’s working professionals across a variety of sectors in the business and nonprofit arenas. Industry leaders realize that being successful requires new approaches to cultivating sensitivity and inclusive practices from within, as well as developing forward-thinking strategies that effectively integrate various perspectives. The new online certificate program will emphasize the ways in which religious traditions relate to one another, and to contemporary movements in science and the arts. Tuition for the new program will carry forward the GTU’s commitment to make this important professional development opportunity accessible to as many learners as possible.

For more information, contact the GTU admissions office at admissions@gtu.edu.