

Classroom encounters: Interreligious impact

by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

Many of the most moving experiences I have had with students in class have involved encounters with members of other religious traditions. When teaching at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois, I used to invite Rabbi Herman Schaalman to speak to first-year seminarians about the importance of Jewish-Christian dialogue since the Shoah.

Herman was born in Munich in 1916. He grew up amid the bitter anti-Semitism immediately prior to and during the Nazi era, heard Hitler's demagoguery, and witnessed its impact on German life. Years later he would travel to Israel with other Jewish as well as Catholic leaders, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin among the latter. Underscoring the importance of interreligious dialogue, he would tell the students that if the types of discussions we were having had taken place in Germany in the 1920s, the Shoah would never have happened. When Herman would tell the Catholic seminarians of his hopes for them as future religious leaders, you could hear a pin drop. After one such discussion, a student from a rural area in northern Michigan told me how deeply he had been moved by Herman's remarks. The student had never met a Jewish person before.

At Fordham University in New York City I ask freshmen to attend a worship service in a religion other than their own. With few exceptions, this has been a very positive experience. Students often report that they go to the synagogues and mosques, the Buddhist and Hindu temples with anxieties about being rejected or bored, only to find welcoming, gracious hosts who answer their questions, help them to feel at home, and sometimes offer refreshments after the service. Many say that they would never have ventured such a visit on their own, but that doing so changed the way they see members of other religions.

The most emotionally charged discussion of other religions came after September 11, 2001. A number of Fordham students lost parents or other family and friends in

the attack; many knew someone who was in the World Trade Center at the time. The following Thursday I began class by noting that the tragedy had changed our world. When the students were initially reluctant to say a word, I began talking about Islam's traditional perspectives on war and peace and the background of the terrorist attacks in the history of the Middle East. At that, comments and questions began pouring forth. Students expressed a more lively interest in Islam than I had ever heard, and I modified the schedule later in the course to allow time to discuss the origins and history of Islam.

Often what makes the greatest impact on students is a direct encounter with representatives of other religious traditions. Meeting thoughtful, articulate leaders of other traditions can help to cut through stereotypes and prejudices and create a climate of respect.