

—Illustration by Tobias Becker

Three Modes of Interfaith Direction

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Many years ago, when my old spiritual director moved away, I was faced with the difficulty of finding a new one. Since the direction relationship is so intimate, I approached my search with some trepidation. I was sure of one thing: I didn't want a Christian. Since I am a Christian clergyperson myself, this might seem odd, but in fact I was concerned to find someone with whom to process the often stormy relationship I have with the Christian tradition and even the Christian God. I wanted to find someone who would not judge me for the questions I was raising, and who would have no personal investment in my being on the straight-and-narrow as Christians often understand it. So I grabbed an SDI directory and started looking for Jewish directors in my area.

I made an appointment with "Anne," and nervously awaited our first meeting. But I needn't have. Anne was a wise and experienced matron, who had started life as a Christian. "I became a Jew because it is the only religion they can't throw you out of," she told me with a hearty laugh. I knew then that this would be safe space

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to ask my hard questions.

I have been with my “new” director for over five years now, and I couldn’t be happier with our relationship. I know that I am not alone in participating in such interfaith direction. There is a long-standing tradition, ever since the ecumenical movement in the mid-twentieth century, of Roman Catholics receiving spiritual direction from Protestants and vice versa.

More recently, though, Jews have been companioning Christians, Christians have been walking with agnostics, and Wiccans have found themselves directing Buddhists. Most of my own directees are not Christians, but Jews, Buddhists, Wiccans, and agnostics. Directors are increasingly finding they are being sought out across denominational and major faith lines.

Such cross-pollination definitely offers advantages. Someone with a measure of distance from his or her own religious environment can see more clearly what is happening within it. But interfaith direction comes with its own set of questions as well. How do we ensure that individual journeys are respected, proselytism is avoided, and misunderstandings and stereotypes are not perpetuated? Is interfaith spiritual direction appropriate for everyone? Who is qualified to do it? Most important, what exactly do we mean by interfaith spiritual direction? This article will articulate four stages of faith development and three modes for interfaith work and discuss advantages and pitfalls of each. Although I

provide some examples from my own experience, bear in mind that the modes are theoretical and there is much work yet to do.

A Ministry for Everyone?

Just as spiritual direction is not an effective ministry for everyone, different modes of direction are going to appeal to different people at different places in their spiritual journeys. To help speak about this with more precision, I will be drawing on the ground-breaking work of James Fowler and his theory of faith development (*Stages of Faith*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1981). Fowler’s system is complex and baroque, and in my opinion, a little Piaget goes a long way. Therefore, I suggest Scott Peck’s simplification of Fowler’s system, found in *A Different Drum* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

In Peck’s recasting of Fowler’s faith stages, Stage I is chaotic and antisocial. Essentially this is the unregenerate soul, interested primarily in self-satisfaction. Peck says that “most young children and perhaps one in five adults” fall into this stage (p. 150). It is the stage of undeveloped spirituality, where real self-giving love and sacrifice are rare.

Stage II is formal, institutional faith. In this stage, a person gives over the care of his or her spiritual life to an authority (religious institution, scripture, dogma, or a certain minister or guru), whereby the person is liberated from chaos, and life is given order, meaning, and purpose. This is a very real salvation, similar to the purpose military training gives for some, and is appropriate for older children and many adults. In this stage, the authority acts on behalf of the divine, and one strives to align one’s own will with it. The divine is largely seen as “other,” a transcendent being with very clear boundaries regarding conduct and doctrine. Among Christians, most fundamentalists and many Catholics and mainline Protestants fall into this category. Orthodox Jews are also most likely to be Stage II believers, and most religions have conservative wings that fit the category.

Not everyone will be content with the degree of legalism Stage II entails, however. Those who begin to question the institution move into Stage III, or skeptical, individual faith. Many Stage III seekers are agnostics, acknowledging that they do not know what ultimate reality is nor how to approach it. They may read far and wide in the fields of philosophy and world religions, and

may begin to piece together an eclectic and individual spirituality that is uniquely theirs. This “rebel” period puts them at odds with most institutions, and Stage III seekers are generally suspicious of organized religion of any kind, but still many may remain a part of it because their skeptical journey brings them back around to truths found in existing faith traditions. A number of people will find a lifelong home in this stage, creating meaning in their lives as activists, humanists, or social reformers.

People at Stage IV are mystics, in love with the Mystery that pervades the universe, the ineffable divinity that cannot be named, comprehended, or quantified. Mystics value religious tradition, but hold its institutions lightly, investing in the vision of divinity offered by a tradition but not necessarily in the trappings. Dogma and discipline may be useful fodder for contemplation, but for mystics, all of this is subordinate to the essential Mystery which transcends the human, cultural “clothes” it is dressed in in any given faith. Mystics see all things as connected

— all beings, all places, all times meet and are at One in the Mystery.

As Scott Peck writes, mystics “love mystery, in dramatic contrast to those in Stage II, who need simple, clear-cut dogmatic structures and have little taste for the unknown and unknowable. While Stage IV men and women will enter religion in order to approach mystery, people in Stage II, to a considerable extent, enter religion in order to escape from it. Thus there is the confusion of people

entering not only into religion but into the same religion — and sometimes the same denomination — not only for different motives but for totally opposite motives” (p. 154).



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Spiritual directors may range from Stage II through Stage IV. If you find a Stage I spiritual director, be advised to run far and fast in the opposite direction! Most of our directees are from these same three stages. In ages past it may be assumed that most spiritual direction took place between directors and directees who were both Stage II. Now, however, with the advent of interfaith consciousness, many of the exclusive claims of Stage II religion are being questioned. I think that many spiritual direction training programs assume an openness to Stage IV, and that most directors-in-training are not horrified at such instruction. Most directors are not surprised to be approached by a directee not of their own religious persuasion. Part of the reason for this is cultural. The twentieth century as a culture could

be said to be Stage III. Western first-world culture is beginning to teeter toward Stage IV in this new century, and we are beginning to see people of other cultures as being much like ourselves, with their religious traditions providing the same comfort and salvation as our own. Spiritual directors knowledgeable about this profound cultural shift can help make the transition a smooth one.

Fowler’s theory of faith stages is, of course, just a system. Helpful as it is, it implies a hierarchical progression,

leading the casual observer to conclude that Stage II is inferior to III or IV. This is not so. As a developmental stage, each has its appropriate place. While Stage II may indeed be an “inferior” state for a person who goes on to Stages III or IV, it may also be inappropriate for someone who needs the structure of Stage II to be forced into III. In fact, it would be violent. Directors must be on guard against spiritual self-rating, acknowledge that the divine has different plans for each of us, and reckon that Stage II faith still fits a sizable cross-section of the population.

Faith stages are, however, a convenient tool for the job at hand: considering interfaith spiritual direction and different modes of interfaith work. In discussing the three modes that follow, I will give attention to stages appropriate for director and directee.

Mode One: Sharing Wisdom

When “Kay” approached me for spiritual direction several years ago, she did not know very much about me. She was a mainline Protestant who had come from an evangelical background. She was aware that I was a Catholic clergyman, was open to the validity of my spiritual journey, and to some extent also to the insights of Catholic spirituality. We agreed that we would not try to convert one another, and when we sat together, we did so as Protestant and Catholic. She was fearful at first, when I suggested reading one of the medieval mystics. “It’s all so Catholic!” she complained after one foray. But she has since warmed up to them and acknowledges that they have something to teach her about the spiritual journey. I have encouraged her to maintain a devotional practice congruent with her tradition, and increase involvement in her local church.

Sharing wisdom is the most popular mode of interfaith spiritual direction. Here, director and directee each sit securely in their respective faith traditions, freely utilizing wisdom from each. Participants do not try to convert, but respect each other’s paths. For this reason, parties must agree that valid spiritual paths exist outside of their own — difficult for some Stage II believers. However, many Stage II Christians believe that other Christian denominations, and even some Jews, have a valid relationship with the divine. Similarly, Jews do not doubt that God has valid covenants with Gentiles. Stage II directors who can respect the validity of covenants with “other sheep” will most likely be able to effectively

companion those of another faith tradition.

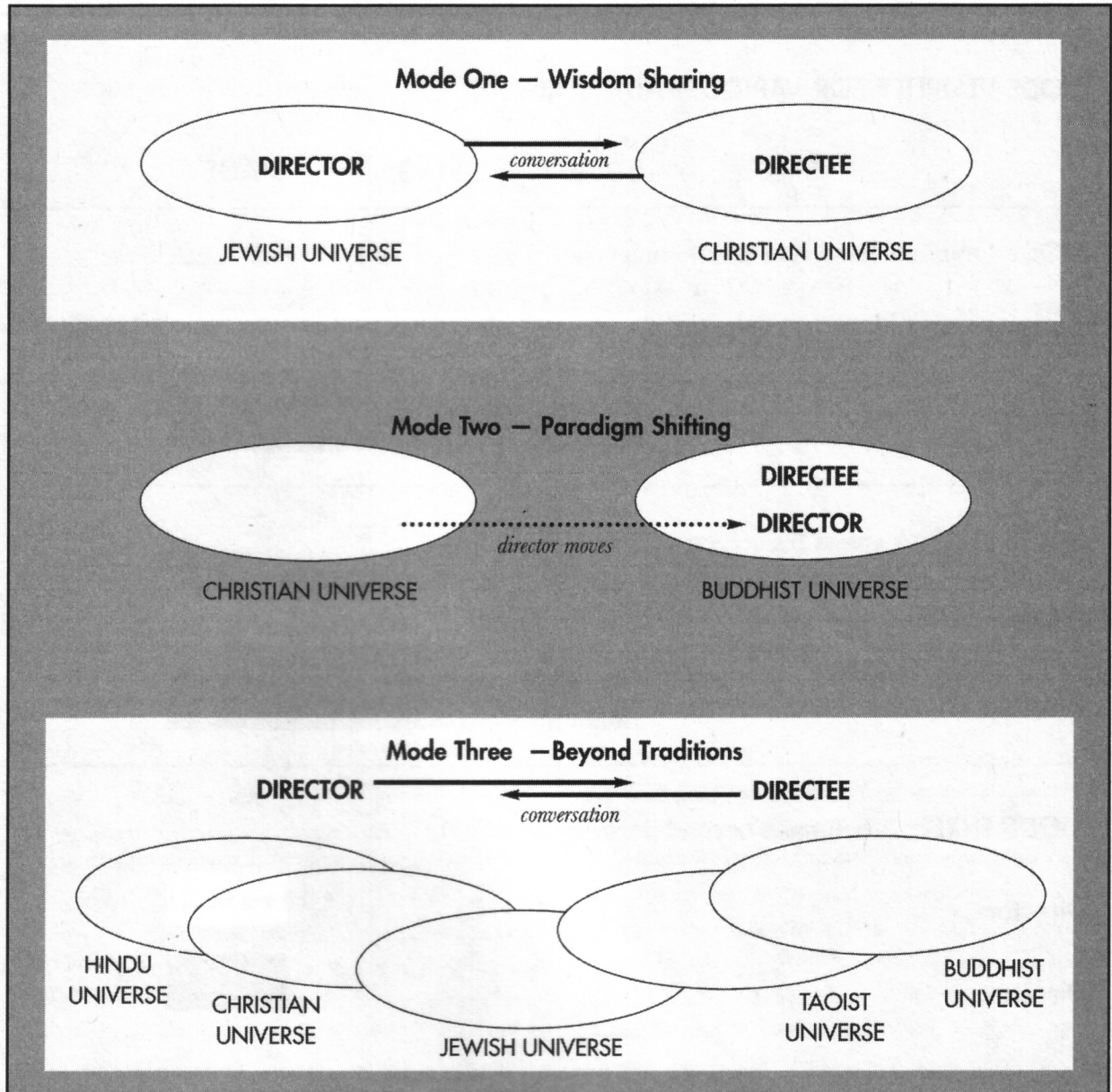
Although it is possible to accompany someone of another tradition with no knowledge of the directee’s faith, it is far better to have an understanding of at least major principles. Misunderstandings about religion are legion, and this can have disastrous results in direction. For instance, a Baptist spiritual director should not assume his Catholic directee believes he has to work his way into heaven (a common notion in Baptist circles). The director has some responsibility to do basic research on a directee’s spiritual tradition, as well as to be teachable during sessions.

For this mode, the director can be at Stage II, III, or IV; the directee may be at II, III, or IV, as well. In sharing wisdom, the director should listen closely for elements in the directee’s faith tradition that have charged significance that the director might be missing due to unfamiliarity with the tradition. The director should be liberal with questions about unknowns in a directee’s tradition. A directee can gain clarity about her or his own tradition by having to explain it.

Directors should also feel free to offer analogies and anecdotes from their own faith traditions. Since religious aspiration is consistent throughout humankind, such analogical experimentation can help a director understand and empathize with a directee’s religious experience, and the director should not hesitate to employ it.

A particular pitfall to this approach is the often unconscious assumption of the superiority of one’s own tradition, which can affect a director at any faith stage. Most will deny this cognitively, but the dearness of the familiar can, and does, betray us. Again, caution against valuing one faith stage more than another is required. At times in my relationship with Kay, I drifted into Stage III questioning. She always reacted poorly to this, and once scolded me for it, and rightly so. I realized that my questioning, so normal for my own path, was a violence to hers and inappropriate. Learning to respect the boundaries of one’s directee in regard to faith stages is imperative.

If the director is at Stage IV, and directee at Stage III or IV, the work may begin in Mode One, but may proceed to Mode Two or, more probably, Mode Three as the relationship develops. A familiarity and comfort with each of the modes will help a director to move from one to another when it seems appropriate to do so.



Mode Two: Paradigm Shifting

When “Mary” first wrote to me requesting email spiritual direction, I was caught a bit off guard. She presented herself as a “questioning agnostic,” and had gleaned from my website that I might be a suitable director for her, even if she wasn’t sure she had a spiritual life at all. But she was very firm about her boundaries. Since I am a Christian, she had to be sure she could trust me not to “take the easy way out,” by appealing to revelation or tradition. Having a good grounding in existential philosophy, I felt I could meet Mary on her own ground, and companion her effectively as she sought

depth and meaning, even if she could not accept the notion of God. To do this, I had to leave my own universe behind each time I came to the keyboard to answer her emails. I had to make a conscious choice to exit my own universe and enter hers. It has been tempting to bring a “picnic basket” of wisdom with me, and I have now and then sneaked in an item or two, but I have been largely successful at checking my own paradigm at the door, and entering fully into hers.

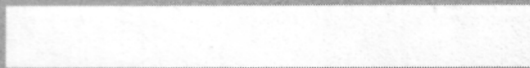
In Mode Two, the director “surfs” from one paradigm to another, entering completely into the worldview of the directee. The director, essentially, “puts on” the religious

MODE VIABILITY FOR VARIOUS FAITH STAGES

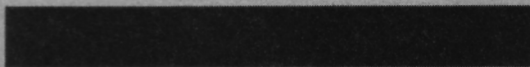
STAGE I STAGE II STAGE III STAGE IV

MODE ONE: universe A relates to universe B

Director

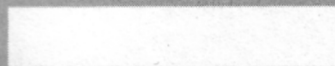


Directee

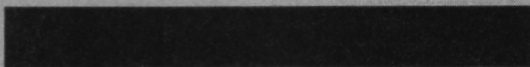


MODE TWO: A enters B's universe

Director

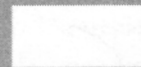


Directee

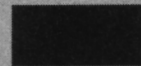


MODE THREE: A & B meet beyond paradigms

Director



Directee



FAITH STAGE SUMMARY

(from Different Drum, by M. Scott Peck)

STAGE I: Chaotic, antisocial

STAGE II: Formal, institutional

STAGE III: Skeptic, individual

STAGE IV: Mystic, communal

universe of the directee the way Mr. Rogers put on his sweater, leaving his or her own religious tradition on a peg in the hall.

Mode Two is much more demanding on the director than the first mode. To work in Mode Two effectively, the director needs to have a reading knowledge of the directee's faith tradition, and at least some firsthand knowledge as well. Because of this, a director is going to be limited in those he or she can direct in this mode. But if one is a convert from one tradition to another (and is on good terms with one's faith of origin), or has over time studied many religions, Mode Two can be very effective.

The assumption of this mode is that while religious experience is common to all people, the cultural clothes in which that experience finds expression is to some extent arbitrary. A director conversant and comfortable in more than one tradition can enter a string of conflicting universes with minimal vertigo. Directors in this mode must be of either Stage III or IV, while directees may be of Stages II, III or IV.

Trouble spots to look for in Mode Two include assuming more knowledge about a tradition than one actually has, and the false assumption that one can adequately empathize with religious experiences in unfamiliar contexts. Another danger is forgetting which room of the cosmological house one is in and "slipping back" into another paradigm, especially one's preferred paradigm. Mode Two demands that we remain with the directee in her or his own spiritual universe, speaking in the person's native religious language, and illustrating one's points with stories and examples largely from that tradition.

Another pitfall is a director's possible neglect of the spiritual disciplines of his or her own tradition, once an inner sense of religious relativity has been achieved. This is more likely in Stage III directors, as their direct experience of the divine may be limited, although Stage IV directors are also susceptible. Professional responsibility demands due attention to spiritual discipline and spiritual community, even if such are acquired in a variety of settings.

Mode Three: Beyond Traditions

"Gary" had walked the mystic's path for some time, going from Roman Catholic practice to Episcopalian to Baptist and back to the Anglicans in his spiritual journey.

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He read widely in the world's religions, and had come to regard many faiths as valid paths to liberation. He struggled with which tradition to participate in, and then something strange and mysterious happened. The Goddess came to him in a dream and claimed him for her own. Discerning that this was a true sign, Gary devoted himself to the study of Wicca.

The old way of the Goddess was the native religion of Europe, expressed through many pantheons, in which earth's vital forces (such as fire, wind, and fertility) were entrusted to distinct gods or goddesses. In worshipping these deities, Wiccans honor the vital forces of Mother Earth, and learn to understand and cooperate with them.

Gary felt he had come home, and his spiritual journey kicked into high gear when he began to work toward his initiations. He is now a Wiccan priest, and the first Wiccan hospital chaplain in his area.

Since I had studied Wicca formally, I might have journeyed with Gary from one paradigm to another, as in Mode Two. But instead, though Gary's religious practice changed dramatically, he still viewed the world with an essentially universalist perspective, acknowledging many valid spiritual paths. Thus our conversations drew from

Taoist, Christian, Buddhist, and many other spiritual traditions, in addition to Wicca. We met at that place where there is no name, but every name; no way, but every way; no distinction, yet many expressions. It is a place outside of any one tradition, but informed by many.

This path is the rarest of the modes, as it requires both director and directee to be at Stage IV. It also assumes that director and directee are knowledgeable of many spiritual traditions, or at least eager to explore them. Speculation along mystical lines is possible with Stage III seekers, even for extended conversations, but is not ultimately sustainable. Of course, to Stage II believers, such talk is heresy. Among Stage IV mystics, however, this mode is usually optimal.

Often a director may accompany someone between stages. When a directee is emerging into Stage IV, it is hard to contain the relationship within Modes One or Two, nor should the director try. This transition is likely to be made with great exhilaration, but may also entail much consternation. Great care should be exercised not to "bump" the seeker prematurely into the next level.

To walk with Stage IV mystics in Mode Three, it is helpful to have a wide knowledge of mystical literature. Your directee may need frequent reading suggestions, as new Stage IV's are voracious, moreso in my experience than in other stages. Seasoned mystics need literary mentoring as they attempt to ground the mystical vision in daily life.

A danger of this mode is its headiness. Mystics can get lost in the One and lose interest in other aspects of their lives. Directors can help mystics remember their mundane lives. Disconnected from a tradition, a mystic can languish with no spiritual discipline, rule of life, or community. The Benedictine monastic tradition lends insight to the need to balance contemplation with hard work and close community, and Buddhist mindfulness practice will also help ground mystics in a sangha (spiritual community), where needs for fellowship and service can be met.

A potential danger is the director's own level of comfort with religious elements that a mystic might bring to a session. If directees sense that a director has a prejudice

against, say, Hinduism or the occult, mystics may find it uncomfortable to disclose the depth and breadth of their spiritual explorations. When directees move into uncomfortable spaces, directors can responsibly accompany them by remaining supportive in the session, doing their homework outside of it, and perhaps sharing their discomfort in an appropriate way.

Conclusion

Just as people frequently move from one stage of faith to another, directors will find a similar fluidity between modes of interfaith spiritual direction. It may be obvious at a first meeting which mode is appropriate for a particular directee, but it is very likely that if the directee is in transition from one faith stage to another, the mode will change too. Directors will undoubtedly be more comfortable with one mode more than another, but will be rewarded by flexibility, as the needs of each directee are unique.

Those who work with groups will find the modes helpful as well, especially as a group is trying to discover its group identity and what it seeks to accomplish. Mode Two is inappropriate for group work, as the subjective demands are too great, but Modes One and Three work well with groups. It may be that a group will make a conscious decision which mode it chooses to work in.

Just as no one stage of faith is superior to others, no one mode of interfaith spiritual direction is to be valued over others. My personal favorite is Mode Two, but I find it inappropriate for most of my directees. Three is not the goal, any more than Mode One should be thought of as transitional. Each mode has a place in interfaith work, and other models may emerge with time. Interfaith spiritual direction may be fairly new in the history of the ministry, and a novelty to some, but it is quickly becoming normative. Much more theoretical work is needed to help us understand, assess, and assist those who come to us, from whatever tradition they hail. It is my hope that an understanding of these three modes will foster further discussion and discovery. ■