PROFILES IN SCIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES

Nancy ADLEMAN

Nancy Adleman is a Professor of Psychology at Catholic University. We spoke with her about her experience as part of the Science for Seminaries program. Photo courtesy N. Adleman.

Why did you participate in this project? What was your experience like and how were your efforts received?

A majority of Americans have a religious affiliation. For many Americans, their main exposure to big ideas with a scientific basis is from non-scientific populations, or from their religious leaders. By [scientists] engaging in dialogue with these groups, we can bring more scientific ideas and thought processes to the general public. It's also really important for us, as scientists, to consider context and what's driving the questions that we're getting from the public.

What was your experience like and how were your efforts received?

One really pleasant surprise from me being part of Science for Seminaries was how wonderful everyone was and how much in common I had with people in the

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religious and theological fields. We could talk about all sorts of things—science, theology, and everyday issues, too. It was a great experience for me that opened up my mind as a scientist.

The project has been received really well. Interestingly, my colleagues in religious studies have sent several seminarians to take some of my courses in the psychology department, and it's been really fun to have seminarians there. I teach basic neuroscience, so when I teach about how sensory perception works, or how decision-making works, or learning, it's really fun to have people with diverse backgrounds who can bring up questions that graduate psychology students wouldn't necessarily think of. It's led to some really fruitful discussions in class.

What did you gain from your time with the project?

It's been a great reminder that the religious public and religious leaders are really interested in science and what science is learning about our world, and also about how [scientists] think and how we relate to each other. I've really enjoyed it.

Because of my participation with Science for Seminaries, I was able to develop a fairly close relationship with a theologian in my university who is very interested in understanding how psalms and the structure of mass help support learning in those situations. We've talked about how sensory perception and structuring can help with learning and attention. In a religious setting, we're talking about things like candlelight, incense, colorful art in the church, things that really engage us on more than just an intellectual level but in different sensory domains. All of these can help maintain attention and improve learning. That is something that the church has employed throughout the years, whether or not we knew scientifically it would be helpful.

We have also talked a lot about the roles that neuroscience and psychology can play in informing and helping people who have trauma or have been through hurtful situations, and he's very interested in incorporating that into his educational platform for seminarians.

What advice would you give to someone interested in doing something similar?

Keep in mind that we all have the same goal, which is to learn about our world. We speak a common language, which is awe and wonder about the world at large. Meet on common ground and consider our common interests as you're trying to have these discussions. ≈

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