The plurality and ambiguity of postmodern society present unique challenges for religious educators who wish to foster interreligious education and dialogue. There are many faces of postmodernity, and those who teach are challenged to respond with courage and honesty to the implications generated by critical analysis of the postmodern project. The interreligious aspect of religious education is inherent to religious education itself, as Gabriel Moran asserts (1989, p. 228). While in the last century religious groups and individuals found themselves in a world of religious pluralism, it is much more the case today. The term “inter” in an interreligious approach means understanding one’s own religious position in relation to other religious possibilities (Moran, p. 228).

It has been claimed that postmodernism has touched every field, permeating cultural analysis as a whole, with results that are positive, negative, and ambiguous. How to respond to pluralism while cutting across the different cultures that rupture society, and at the same time, preserve certain core traditional values, represents a dilemma for educators. The chapters in this part address these challenges head on by acknowledging the difference and otherness of the “other” while celebrating our commonality. Authors propose that to educate religiously in the new millennium requires educators to acknowledge and embrace the fact that the experience of others is truly different from our own. Writing from different religions and various countries, representing a variety of philosophical backgrounds, authors probe, prod, and critique current religious educational practice and offer skills, information, and criteria for theory building and educational practice. The chapters in this part illustrate that theoretical discussion about interreligious education can only be advanced in the context of international, interreligious, and interdisciplinary perspectives. Even so, the chapters are sure to generate intense and many-sided debate.

Although there are a variety of ways of shaping the conversation, this part is divided into four subparts. The chapters in each subpart aim at enhancing the critical, scholarly presentation of various dimensions of historical religions and advancing the understanding of specific religions’ truth claims. The part is framed by two chapters written by the same author. They serve as “end pieces” for the whole part which is comprised of various chapters.
The first subpart of this part contains five chapters devoted to key aspects of the philosophical foundations of interreligious education. In the first “end piece” chapter, “Religious Pluralism and the Paradigm,” Evelina Orteza y Miranda presents “the paradigm,” namely, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, as a response to religious diversity and plurality. It points out the usefulness and limitations of “the paradigm” and suggests a new way of dealing with religious pluralism that gives due regard to all religions, namely, interreligious dialogue. (This is the subject of the last chapter of this part.)

In his chapter, “Enlightenment’s Wake: Religion and Education at the Close of the Modern Age,” L. Philip Barnes offers a critique of modern British religious education and its commitment to Enlightenment values and commitments. He suggests that the liberal theological conviction that the different religions are each spiritually valid is constitutive of British education. Barnes posits that current representations of religion in British religious education are limited in their capacity to challenge racism and religious intolerance because they are ill-equipped conceptually to develop respect for difference. Brendan Carmody argues for the need to confront the question of truth. In “Interreligious Education and the Question of Truth,” he points out that there can be a tendency to overemphasize sameness and downplay difference in approaches that strive for inclusiveness. He calls for an approach that recognizes difference and promotes dialogue, where attention is given to the truth claims of religion in a way that enhances rather than undermines the creation of community. “Philosophical Reflections on Dialogue” by John L. Elias reviews philosophical discourse on dialogue and education. The author draws selectively on the extensive tradition of Western philosophers who have written about dialogue as a method for arriving at knowledge and truth. Elias considers the nature of dialogue, its risks, limitations, and processes. The last chapter in this subpart is “The Search for a Common Epistemological Ground within the Interreligious Framework: A Concept-Centered Approach.” The author, Ismail Lalif Hacinebioglu, places emphasis on the relationship between certain concepts, epistemology, truth-values, and religion. He concludes that there is an urgency to reach a level of understanding of various truth claims which could enable the sharing of peace for all.

The three chapters in the second subpart of this part consider how some religious bodies have and could interact with each other. Two scholars collaborate in the first chapter: Christian author David L. Coppola and Jewish scholar Rabbi Joseph H. Ehrenkranz. In “Toward a Theoretical Framework for Participating in Interreligious Education and Dialogue,” they ground their framework in six philosophical convictions that are strongly rooted in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. They conclude with some broad theoretical applications for interreligious dialogue and education based on this framework. The chapter, “Interreligious Dialogue: Ecumenical Engagement in Interfaith Action,” by Douglas Pratt, outlines some background, initial impetus, and rationales whereby the Christian Church has engaged in interreligious dialogue. Focus is on the respective central agencies of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The author proposes that in and through this comparative study, the contours of an ecumenical Christian
stance toward – and or engagement in – interreligious dialogue should emerge. Paul E. Bumbar’s chapter, “Many Mansions: East and West in the Roman Catholic Communion,” looks at what is called the Roman Catholic Church, and provides an introduction to the 19 Eastern Catholic Churches within that communion. Their somewhat troubled history with the Church of Rome reveals how difficult and necessary it is for religious bodies and educators to offset even benevolent hegemonies in order to maintain and develop religious identity.

Chapters in the third subpart address some political issues which ground interreligious education efforts. Using the experience of the United States and its experiment of banning religion in public schools, Gabriel Moran’s chapter, “Religious Education in U.S. State Schools,” explores the impact of such separation on interreligious dialogue. Trond Enger argues that because all religions are complex entities, there is a need for religious criticism which adheres to adequate standards. In “Civilizing the Religions,” he points to human rights as that standard, and discusses the internal conflicting principles which emerge from that standard from the perspective of recent experiences in Norway. Lucinda Nolan’s chapter, “The Heritage of the Women Delegates’ Speeches to the World Parliament of Religions, 1893,” is an exposition of a selection of prominent speeches given by women at the Parliament. The event marked the emergence of women as both religious leaders and heralds of the growing pluralism of the United States at the turn of the century. Her chapter offers insights into the fledgling interreligious movement of the time, and highlights key theoretical principles which have relevance for interreligious education today. Dzintra Ilisko uses the arena of Latvia’s changing society as an example of the limitations and possibilities of emerging interreligious models of education. Building on the premise that true religious education is explicitly interreligious, her chapter, “Educational Encounters and Interreligious Education: A Latvian Case Study for Expanding the Borders of Hospitality,” proposes a hermeneutic of hospitality as a powerful tool for fostering interreligious education.

The five chapters which comprise the last subpart of Part 1 are focused on the process and aims of education. In his chapter, “Religious Foundations of Education: Perspectives of Muslim Scholars,” Hamid Reza Alavi highlights the educational theories and methods of major Muslim scholars, and suggests how they have relevance for interreligious education in current settings. The topic of wisdom is explored by Mehmet Onal in “Wisdom (HIKMAH) as a Holistic Basis for Interreligious Education.” The author suggests that the concept of wisdom is a crucial aspect of all religious education including Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. His chapter presents definitions of wisdom, and focuses on world wisdom literature and the religious traditions. Amjad Hussain argues for a contextual intercultural and interreligious Islamic education that has a healthy balance between ethnic cultural identity, religious life, and confident dialogue. His chapter, “Islamic Education in the West: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Implications,” especially emphasizes the necessity for a more intercultural-oriented Islamic education. Drawing on insights from systems theory and ecology, Anthony Ozele’s chapter, “Envisioning an Ecosystems Perspective for Interreligious Education: A Christian
View,” addresses some of its ramifications for interreligious education. The underlying principle of the ecosystem perspective is the attainment of stability and mutual consideration in all societal transactions as well as reciprocal cooperation between various parts of the ecosystem. This chapter suggests that the family ecosystems perspective is fundamentally pertinent for envisioning a curriculum of interreligious education that is creatively responsive to the dynamics of global realities.

The last chapter in this subpart is also the closing “end piece” of the whole part. In “Religious Pluralism and Dialogue/Interreligious Dialogue,” Evelina Orteza y Miranda shows that dialogue/interreligious dialogue has come to be accepted as a way to deal with questions that arise out of religious diversity and the relation of one religion to another. She carefully analyzes the various meanings and nuances of dialogue and highlights their importance for religious/interreligious education. Working from the philosophical principle of reality, her chapter asks the student of religion to take religion’s own claims seriously. She concludes that interreligious education, which encourages dialogue between and among various religious beliefs, will heighten one’s awareness of one’s reasons for believing what one believes and so understand its implications for daily living.

In addressing the philosophical and theoretical aspects of interreligious education, the chapters in this part broaden the arena of discourse for religions. The hope is that such discourse will enhance progress toward peace and justice. Martin E. Marty (2005) puts it well:

Faiths will continue to collide, but those individuals and groups that risk hospitality and promote engagement with the stranger, the different, the other, will contribute to a world in which measured hopes can survive and those who hope can guide. (p. 178)

References