

## **When Practice Precedes Theory: A Study of Interfaith Ritual**

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*Challenging the deductive method in interfaith theologies derived from first principles of doctrine, the practices of inter-riting often precede (and transgress) the theoretical assertions of theology. This study centers on three spheres of inter-riting undertaken by “professional” theologians, “exploratory” practitioners of interfaith dialogue, and “pedagogical” sites of interfaith classrooms. Interfaith ritual newly informs theory and theology with respect to concrete practices. As embodied, it also necessarily includes our racialized differences, inviting the fields of interfaith studies and interreligious theology to examine more fully the racial dimension of our discourses.*

### ***Deductive Methods and Interfaith Ritual***

The project of interfaith theology has historically proceeded in a deductive fashion. In this method, the consideration of new information about the religious other is framed first by the principles of doctrine, reasoning from the theoretical to inquire after the possibilities of interfaith learning and practice. The theoretical/theological precedes practice by setting the groundwork for what is to be considered, and anticipating outcomes that might be fit back into the doctrinal frame of truth claims and beliefs. For example, holding tightly to a theological claim of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms rituals as evidence of the human quest for God and witnesses the ritual of non-Christian traditions as proof that we can call the human a “religious being.”<sup>1</sup> But, this positive assessment of the practices as evidence of a quest for God does not guarantee their value. Indeed, the search for God in other religions, as it is “among shadows and images,” is affirmed conditionally insofar as “the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as ‘a preparation for the Gospel.’”<sup>2</sup> Since there are dangers in humanity’s religious behaviors as they “also display the limits and errors that disfigure the image of God in them,”<sup>3</sup> the Catholic Church offers a criterion to gauge the religious beliefs and practices of others. Whatever reflects a “ray of that Truth” which is Christ is valued as evidence that practitioners of other faiths are approximating the truth of Christian thought and practice.<sup>4</sup> The statement *Dominus Iesus* from 2000 expresses it this way:

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part I, Section 1, Chapter 1, paragraph 28 states, “In many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behavior: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a *religious being*.” Available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P9.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P9.HTM), accessed 7 November 2016 (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part I, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 9, paragraph 843. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P29.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P29.HTM), accessed 7 November 2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part I, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 9, paragraph 844. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P29.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P29.HTM), accessed 7 November 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See the language of *Nostra Aetate* from the Second Vatican Council: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ ‘the way, the truth, and

Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God. One cannot attribute to these, however, a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. 1 Cor 10:20-21), constitute an obstacle to salvation.<sup>5</sup>

In a deductive approach, since the truth of the Catholic faith is embedded in its sacraments and rituals and these provide the fullness of salvation, there is no *need* to participate ritually with other faiths, except insofar as to see the reflection of Christ there.<sup>6</sup>

Characteristic of this deductive reasoning in systematic theology is the work of Karl Rahner, who deduced a transcendental orientation of all persons anticipating a savior. For Rahner, we can know from the first principles of Christian scripture (and philosophical reasoning) that all persons desire the fullness of salvation that a savior brings, and we can hypothesize that the rituals and practices of their religious traditions exhibit this transcendental orientation. It is the work of the history of religions in Rahner's estimation (or perhaps inter-riting in our own) to demonstrate whether and where it is the case that religions are anticipating a savior and whether and where that savior approximates the uniquely true savior, Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Practices of Inter-riting Challenge Deductive Reasoning***

While the deductive method of Catholic theology proposes that the point of inter-riting is to glimpse "rays of Truth" and find Christ present in other traditions, the actual practices of inter-riting among Catholic professionals propose a different outcome. For example, in the writing of Paul Knitter, the Buddha adds something positively to the Christian expression.<sup>8</sup> Deeply inhabiting the Christian tradition over the course of a lifetime in the ritual practices of Christian prayer and liturgy, nevertheless Knitter describes the "spiritual core" of Buddhist meditation as providing something missing in his own tradition. In his words, "Meditation, understood and practiced with help from Buddhism, is a much-needed way for Christians to get beyond words and conceptual coatings that so often obscure the Mystery at the heart of Christianity."<sup>9</sup> Professional encounters suggest that the

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the life' (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself." Available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html), accessed 7 November 2016.

<sup>5</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, paragraph 21. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html), accessed 7 November 2016.

<sup>6</sup> This pattern of seeking Christ in the rituals of the Other has as its primary manifestation the evidence of Christ foretold in the rituals of the Jews as expressed in the Catechism: "The coming of God's Son to earth is an event of such immensity that God willed to prepare for it over centuries. He makes everything converge on Christ: all the rituals and sacrifices, figures and symbols of the 'First Covenant.' He announces him through the mouths of the prophets who succeeded one another in Israel. Moreover, he awakens in the hearts of the pagans a dim expectation of this coming." *Catechism*, Part I, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 3, paragraph 522. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P1L.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P1L.HTM), accessed 7 November 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Rahner, "Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, translated by Margaret Kohl (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 39–52.

<sup>8</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 142.

<sup>9</sup> Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 156.

deductive method proposed in Catholic doctrine is off-course: the encounters produce not evidence of the Christ Christians already know, but a mystery of God not fully accounted for in Christian doctrine and practice.

The exploratory encounters of lay practitioners similarly do not match the Christian theological presupposition of deductive reasoning. As one interfaith group experienced, participation in the rituals of another community offered the opportunity to consider *what might have been*, not what already was the case in one’s home tradition.<sup>10</sup> Having spent several years in dialogue with one another, they invited one another to participate in rituals of their home traditions. For one Christian participant, this evoked a sense of wonder at the *difference* that is elicited, even in rituals marking similar seasonal celebrations, as she commented, “the spring celebration in the Baha’i [faith]—it was beautiful! And it was different than a Passover, different than an Easter.”<sup>11</sup> Another member, who is grounded in her Jewish practice, made similar remarks about what she feels even just by *hearing* different members describe the variety of their religious practices: “If when she is talking about prayer, or talking about her experience with communion, I can just watch her light up, I want to know what that is about. I want to understand that. If I see it in her, I know it’s accessible in me. And I know it’s accessible in others. I want to pay attention to that—when she lighted up, talking about her experience on hajj.”<sup>12</sup> A Christian participant recounted: “To hear Homara talk about going to Mecca and . . . that is such a moving scene and I’m kind of walking around imagining people walking around this big stone and oh! I’ve seen pictures of a million people packed into one area and it is just awesome to me. It’s just awesome.”<sup>13</sup>

Rather than confirming the elements found in one’s home tradition, I’d like to think of inter-riting along the lines of the perspective of the participant just quoted—as awesome and awe-inspiring. It’s the theological dimension of the *unknown* and the awe-inspiring that is so important in inter-riting. The gift that is being offered is the gift of *uncertainty* and *wonder* that springs from our encounters with other faiths. This is *theologically* significant because too often our certainties erase the mystery of the divine, the awe and wonder that the Catholic tradition celebrates. This awe and wonder, this mystery, is what Thomas Aquinas visioned as the end-goal of human contemplation of the divine. In Aquinas’s theological speculations on the human person after death, the human faculties remain active and find happiness in the unceasing activity of contemplating God. God’s overabundant nature remains incomprehensible as it forever moves the intellect’s desire to know it and satisfies the mind in the experience of wonder.<sup>14</sup> The wonder we experience in the awe-inspiring encounter of inter-riting is a glimpse of that eschatological wonder. But encounter by way of ritual invites us to arrive at this posture of wonder not merely in an intellectual sense, but through the body and the senses. The texture of embodiment is present even in imagining the ritual of the other—the rock, the walking, the other people; it’s an experience, a celebration, not merely an idea.

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<sup>10</sup> The Philadelphia Area Women’s Multifaith Group is the subject of my research in Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 145–164. Interviews were undertaken over a three-year period (2007–2010) with the help of my research associate, Mara Brecht.

<sup>11</sup> Fran (pseud.), interview by Mara Brecht, transcription of digital recording, Narbeth, Pennsylvania, 1 August 2008. Cited in *Motherhood as Metaphor*, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Ava (pseud.), interview by Mara Brecht, transcription of digital recording, West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 20 July 2007. Cited in *Motherhood as Metaphor*, 160.

<sup>13</sup> Joanne (pseud.), interview by Mara Brecht, transcription of digital recording, Philadelphia, 15 December 2007. Cited in *Motherhood as Metaphor*, 160.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller discussion of wonder as a theological virtue in interfaith encounter, see Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “As Long as We Wonder: Possibilities in the Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Theological Studies* (2007): 531–554.

By drawing encounter in through the body, inter-riting promises a significant alternative to inter-textuality insofar as the written word of comparison invites us in through the mind and the intellect, while inter-riting has us comport through our bodies. This bodily dimension brings us in in such a way that our senses precede our comprehension of the event. Two examples from pedagogical transgressions might make this point. As part of an introductory course to the livingness of religious diversity, I have brought my students to a Hindu temple and an Islamic mosque. In each of these episodes, they witnessed the embodiment of ritual, which provided an entry into interfaith relationship. At the mosque, students witnessed the faithful folding themselves in prayer, prostrating on the floor in the embodied posture of submission. They saw demonstrated in a somatic way the ideas they had read, namely, the Islamic commitment that God is greater. Prior to our visit, I invited them to experience what prostration feels like *in our bodies* by moving aside our desks in the classroom and posturing our heads to the floor. Only a very few students were willing to join me in this posture. Discussing afterward the resistance, students said that they thought it would be humiliating, that is, humbling beyond what is reasonable. I asked them to consider this humbling as submission and to turn over in their minds what it is that the Muslim is experiencing in the body: “There is no God but God.” The idea of Islam as “submitting” sounded different to my students, informed by their own bodily aversion to the posture of submission. The textured reality of this commitment as it played out in bodies had a different valence the next day when we were present for the endless stream of cab drivers, mothers, and working-class Muslims passing through the mosque to engage in daily prayer. While the students themselves did not participate in the bodily ritual of daily prayer, the invitation to think with our bodies the day before provided a new lens for considering the Islamic encounter with the divine.

With a different group of students, the bodily encounter of ritual at a Hindu temple yielded a different result. At my request and donation, the priest dedicated the devotion to Ganesh to the well-being of our group. With twenty-five of us gathered around the altar-room, we could witness the embodied approach to God with sights, sounds, and smells that communicated to us through the body’s receptors that were not simply the visual or oral to the intellectual. The priest was not communicating in words that would lead my students to a reasoned understanding, but was communicating through practices to an understanding of a different kind. I name it as understanding because of the group’s response to our host’s performance of a ritual on our behalf inviting and bestowing the abundance of the deity upon us. Students were neither required nor requested to participate, but when the priest returned from Ganesh with the lamp flame of good blessings, each student stepped forward with hands cupped and received.

Our bodies bring us in to interfaith encounter in a way that texts and ideas simply do not. It is through our bodies that we are shaped in what Mark Lewis Taylor describes as a social site ontology.<sup>15</sup> A social site designates “particular meshes of life’s relational complexity” whereby we become who we are through the practices we inhabit.<sup>16</sup> These sites hold within them a teleoaffective structure that communicates not through explicit rules that one can recite but by affectively laying out the “rules-of-the-game” of being part of a particular community.<sup>17</sup> Opening ourselves up to new forms of “somatized sociality,” we become who we are in our bodies through participating in

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 70.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, 78.

practices with others.<sup>18</sup> In each of the cases above, persons were open to being shaped by the practices of another in ways that circumvent the cognitive resistance of doctrinal approaches.

But the different responses of my students to different forms of ritual embodiment and relationality raise interesting questions about the possibilities of inter-riting. In the first example, students were resistant to prostrate themselves on the floor of the classroom, having been invited by me but with no explicitly religious or spiritual context. We were to feel the posture of submission, but had not been welcomed into it by members of a host community. It seemed as though this decontextualized experience offered no logic for participation and no way “in” to the experience. Might my students have been more willing to participate if they had been invited by a Muslim *into* the embodied ritual practice of prostration? That is, might the *actual* context of sacred encounter in ritual have provided them with a greater sense of the *logic* communicated through our bodies? If so, this suggests that ritual cannot be accessed hypothetically and outside the sacred space, or that if ritual is so accessed, it certainly has a different quality to what is communicated. Absent the teleoaffective signposts and structures that shape bodies in ritual practice, the logic of why students would be called to participate was also absent. Contrast this with the students’ willingness to participate in the embodied practice when we were welcomed within the ritual space of the Hindu temple. The logic of Hindu practice in encountering the Divine was made manifest *through* sights, sounds, and smells; and through the extension of relationality by our priest-host, the teleoaffective invitation to participate was a powerful one that elicited a positive response. Welcomed in through our bodies and our senses, inter-riting offers not only opportunities for wonder, but also links us affectively to Others in relationship. It might subsequently enable new forms of sociality and political action because of the *kinds* of bodies we inhabit.

### ***Inter-riting and the Gift of Otherness***

In textual encounter, the “Other” is disembodied and his/her Otherness obscured in the conceptual grasp that I lay upon her ideas. His/her embodied, gendered, physical Otherness is erased as I encounter simply ideas, quite possibly imagining that her/his body approximates my own, but more likely assuming that their bodies are unimportant to the religious quest for truth. But in the embodied encounter of inter-riting, I encounter her/his Otherness in its gendered and raced physicality. And I experience that gendered and raced physicality in a relationship to the divine. How am I open to wonder, then, not only about the divine reality that might sustain existence, but the divine reality embedded in the bodies that I encounter? Might inter-riting provide for social shaping that is appreciatively interracial?

The opportunity for inter-riting in the presence of bodies that have been racialized is unimaginably important in the context of the United States, which has been crafted as a White Christian nation. From the moment of its inception, through its civil religion and its legislation, the United States has been projected as a city on a hill that demonstrates God’s favor on White Christians, while employing the bodies of racial and religious others to build the White Christian nation.<sup>19</sup> Like the deductive reasoning of European Christian theology, the American narrative has been one of supremacy of White Christianity with the possibility that the Other might approximate

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor, 105.

<sup>19</sup> For a concise overview of this history, see Joseph Barndt, *Becoming an Anti-Racist Church: Journeying toward Wholeness* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011).

this ideal; but in reality those who have not approximated the White Christian ideals are regularly denied access, rights, and material well-being. The erasure of indigenous practices —by war or by conversion—was necessary to elevate the Brown or Red native to White Christian culture.<sup>20</sup> The enslavement of Black bodies was underwritten by a theological certainty in the supremacy of White Christianity over the colorings of Islam or the darkness of paganism.<sup>21</sup> The dismemberment and destruction of Black bodies were necessary to conform them to White Christian morality.<sup>22</sup> The exclusion of Asian bodies was grounded in the argument that their religion made them not quite American enough.<sup>23</sup> The death of bodies Not-Quite-White-Enough because their religious garb gives hints of their religious practices still occurs in a White Christian nation.<sup>24</sup> With lawmakers proposing that refugees be screened for their adherence to Christianity, it is clear that interreligious understanding *is* political. The history of the United States as a nation that oppressed non-White and non-Christian bodies in the pursuit of White Christian supremacy and global dominance is the backdrop against which inter-racial inter-riting is necessary, not only theologically but politically.

Inter-riting may be a necessary step in the repentance required of a White Christian nation since the rites of the racialized Other implicitly insist that neither Whiteness nor Christianity is the arbiter of truth, of goodness, or of religiosity. In the context of inter-riting, the gendered and raced specificity conveys potently the sacred significance of Black and Brown bodies in a way that textual encounter does not allow. Experiencing the embodiment of the Other as a vehicle of divine presence provides an opportunity to counter-act the White supremacy that has poisoned Christian practice and has shaped a White Christian nation. That inter-riting is not only interreligious but also interracial communicates profoundly that Black and Brown bodies matter. They are of sacred significance as vehicles for the divine among us. Those who inhabit Black and Brown bodies surely

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<sup>20</sup> See Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of American Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Arguments for the theological supremacy of Christianity over African traditions and Islamic influences were standard tropes from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. See Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “Supremacy in the Sense of the Faith: Theological Anthropology and the ‘Various Ranks,’” in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, edited by Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 53–68.

<sup>22</sup> See James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Such was the argument leveraged by Aaron Augustus Sargent. See “Chinese Immigration. Speech of Hon. A. A. Sargent, of California, in the Senate of the United States, March 7, 1878” (Washington, 1878), 23. Available at Online Archive of California, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb387002gk/?order=2&brand=oac4>, accessed November 19, 2016. The resulting Chinese exclusion act of 1882 and restriction of immigrants from the Asiatic Zone in 1917 enhanced the demographic of America as a White Christian nation. For treatment of this in American Christian history, see Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “Warrants for Reconstruction: Christian Hegemony, White Supremacy,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51 (Winter 2016): 54–79.

<sup>24</sup> The surveillance and incarceration of Muslim men is evidence that this practice still persists. See Jaideep Singh, “A New American Apartheid: Racialized, Religious Minorities in the Post-9/11 Era,” *Sikh Formations* 9, no. 2 (2013): 114–144. The murders of three Muslim students, Deah Shaddy Barakat (age 23), Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha (age 21), and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha (age 19) also point to ongoing antipathy towards those Not-Quite-White-Enough. Yusor and Razan’s father, Mohammed Abu-Salha, recalled Yusor saying: “[Our neighbor] hates us for who we are and how we look.” “Why the Chapel Hill Shooting Was More Hate Crime Than ‘Parking Dispute,’” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erik-ose/why-the-chapel-hill-shooting-hate-crime\\_b\\_6681968.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erik-ose/why-the-chapel-hill-shooting-hate-crime_b_6681968.html), updated 20 April 2015. The shooting of members of the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin (in Oak Creek) also points to the religious and racial constructions that are death-dealing for those who fall outside the frame of the White Christian nation. See “Gunman Kills 6 at a Sikh Temple Near Milwaukee,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/06/us/shooting-reported-at-temple-in-wisconsin.html>, 5 August 2012.

know this. But for those of us who have been poisoned by the narrative of White Christian supremacy, this embodied access to this theological truth is politically important. Thus, the inter-riting that forges interreligious solidarities (across faith traditions) as well as the inter-riting that fosters intra-religious solidarities (within faith communities) are *theological* and might also support *political* action that ensures the well-being of all persons. The encounter of inter-riting may provide us with theological resources to challenge Christian hegemony along the way to dismantling White supremacy, for the embrace of a truly multi-racial, multi-religious nation that is in our midst.

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