

## Special Issue Introduction



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The commitment to the intersection of arts and religion that Lucinda Mosher has is second-to-none. The fact that she wrote an essay for a special journal issue celebrating her and her contributions to this space is a testament to that commitment. When I first met Dr. Mosher, it was through various interfaith events and activities. Over time, I learned of her passion and interest in the arts, which overlapped with my own. I would do her a disservice if I tried to explain the breadth and depth of her work, and where her intellectual trajectory is. Instead, I think, as I often have, I want to use Dr. Mosher’s work as a way to reflect about the relationship between religion and art.

The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim and Persian poet Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, or simply Rumi, often inserts the word *khāmūsh*—“silence!”—into his poetry. I have often heard this described as the point at which language fails. He is approaching a truth, or a teaching, that cannot be captured by our senses or our ability to communicate; it must be experienced. It is an expression of the ineffable. In the case of Rumi, this ineffability does not keep us out of his world, but invites us into it. The art form has carried us to a point where we have a choice to continue or not. Because it is in an aural-oral form, silence does not end the conversation, but passes the responsibility to the listener to continue it. In this instance, the art brings us to ineffability and sees it as a space of possibility.

That is the premise for thinking about ineffability across religious traditions: it is a space of possibility. It is not about the Gandhian idea that all religions are true, or the mystical ideas of some common elevated realities, or the perennialist ideas that religions all stem from the same essence. Rather, it recognizes that different religious traditions have different ideas of what is ineffable, so there can be only a limited common language. However, the metaphorical languages presented through the arts offer a space of connection. The particularities of each religious tradition are taken seriously by the artisans, offering us as audience (since we could be reading, viewing, listening, interacting, etc.) a chance to understand the boundaries of thought. The arts allow us to speak to and beyond those boundaries. We can take differences seriously while figuring out ways to communicate with and through difference.

Here, I'm reminded of the power of the arts that we often overlook. As Alberta Arthurs, a cultural critic writes, "But when we need to address ideas, consider change, challenge our systems, size ourselves up, all too often we simply leave the arts behind. We seem to think of them primarily as 'entertainment' or 'leisure.' We call on them to show us 'beauty.' We are often awed, it seems, but seldom activated by the arts."<sup>1</sup> In being invited to discuss the ineffable, the arts activate us. They are necessary for this work because of the aesthetic values they offer us.

Art also forces you to look, listen, or otherwise engage closely with the material, and that type of close attention can move you past expectations to seeing something anew and more accurately.<sup>2</sup> Thus, you can imagine new things, things that are not there, things that are unseen.<sup>3</sup> Again, we return to the idea of imagining possibilities.

In considering the arts as an activating agent, I would be remiss not to consider the work of Stuart Hall and his work in Cultural Studies. While art is not synonymous with culture, it is clearly a constituent part of culture. Thus, art is an active part of political and social change, not a passive object of description.<sup>4</sup> I think it worth quoting Hall at length as to how he understands Cultural Studies:

It stands opposed to the residual and merely reflective role assigned to "the cultural." In its different ways, it conceptualizes culture as interwoven with all social practices; and those practices, in turn, as a common form of human activity: sensuous human praxis, the activity through which men and women make history. It is opposed to the base-superstructure way of formulating the relationship between ideal and material forces, especially where the "base" is defined as the determination by "the economic" in any simple sense. It prefers the wider formulation—the dialectic between social being and social consciousness: neither separable into its distinct poles (in some alternative formulations, the dialectic between "culture" and "non-culture"). It defines "culture" as both the meanings and values which arise among distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they "handle" and respond to the conditions of existence; and as the lived traditions and practices through which those "understandings" are expressed and in which they are embodied.<sup>5</sup>

Culture is thus tied to materiality and relationships, and responses to material conditions and relationships. Culture, and therefore art, bind communities together and illuminate questions of

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<sup>1</sup> Alberta Arthurs, "Poems Don't Stay in Place: How the Arts Move and Change Us," in *Are the Arts Essential?*, edited by Alberta Arthurs and Michael DiNiscia (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Winner, "Why Teach the Arts: Beyond Specious Claims," in *Are the Arts Essential?*, ed. Alberta Arthurs and Michael DiNiscia (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Winner, "Why Teach the Arts: Beyond Specious Claims," 95

<sup>4</sup> See Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays: Volume 1 – Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," in *Essential Essays: Volume 1 – Foundations of Cultural Studies*, 55-56.

power. Cultural Studies also offers us the potential of being limited in our world view of what religion is and how to read art.<sup>6</sup>

Art is important for its aesthetic qualities, for its ability to generate conversations when words fail, and for us to see the world in new ways. It is also dangerous because it lays bare power and calls us to our humanity. As I write elsewhere, “The discussion around...art should not be about idealization or idolization of the past but a recognition that the people who came before us are human, that we are human, and that the people of the future are human. We are in constant conversation with the past, present, and future.”<sup>7</sup> This idea of a shared humanity, with a cultural inheritance, and ability to create now, and leave a legacy for the future, is dangerous for those who seek power over others. This danger extends to religious authoritarians.

Dr. Mosher asked me to contribute to a special issue of the journal *The Muslim World* on Hindu-Muslim relations, and if I could come at the topic through the arts. I wrote about a particular Muslim devotional form called *qawwālī* that has become popular across religious communities.<sup>8</sup> In that piece, I pull on the work of Shemeem Burney Abbas, a specialist on *qawwālī*, who makes a powerful argument around the political nature of *qawwālī*. She says the vernacular languages of the Sufis challenged the elitist claims of those who see the religion of Islam only in Arabic, or perhaps Persian. The Sufis speak to the people and remove intermediaries of power.<sup>9</sup>

Engaging with Dr. Mosher and her work and thought generates a multitude of thoughts on the arts and their relationship with religion. The contributors to this issue are a testament to both the quality of Dr. Mosher’s commitment to these conversations and the variety of ways we can engage with religion and the arts. The scholarly reflections are equally important to understanding the impact Dr. Mosher has in these discussions.

The arts, collectively, I believe are expressions of storytelling. I end with a reflection on the power of storytelling, and thus of the arts, that I think reflects the relevance of what we do:

Storytelling can impel us from situational acceptance to galvanizing action. The arts speak persuasively through stories of inquiry, skill, beauty, mystery, empathy, fear, and challenge—from human beings directly to human beings. Such stories are empowering for artists and communities. They serve to ignite the collective imagination, so that we gather and act on common aspirations. Let us never forget, when the world shudders to a halt in dark periods, particularly when calamity is brought on by a failure of imagination, that we turn to storytellers for solace and to make meaning of the world.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Rashid Hussein, and Zeyba Rahman, “An Urdu of the Twenty-First-century United States,” in *Are the Arts Essential?*, ed. Alberta Arthurs, and Michael DiNiscia (New York: NYU Press, 2022), 118.

<sup>8</sup> See Hussein Rashid, “Making Space: Qawwālī in America,” *Muslim World* 107, no. 2 (2017): 271–86.

<sup>9</sup> See Shemeem Burney Abbas, “Risky Knowledge in Risky Times: Political Discourses of *Qawwālī* and *Sūfīana-Kalam* in Pakistan-Indian Sufism,” *The Muslim World* 97, no. 4 (2007): 628.

<sup>10</sup> Hussein Rashid and Zeyba Rahman, “An Urdu of the Twenty-First-century United States.” in *Are the Arts Essential?*, edited by Alberta Arthurs and Michael DiNiscia (New York: NYU Press, 2022), 129.

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