I am so much more than Lutheran: A Response to Robert Hunt, by Kari Aanestad

In his piece "Muslims, Modernity, and the Prospects of Christian-Muslim Dialogue," Robert Hunt argues that more fruitful interreligious conversations will be aided by classifying Muslims in one of four taxonomies that are named according to the narrative of religious self-understanding. Hunt argues that old taxonomies, which define Muslims according to where they land in respect to the intersection of Islamic tradition and modern thought, are limited in their ability to facilitate interreligious dialogue. The categories are restricted in that they define different strands of Islam in such a way that offers little insight into how different practices of Islam may interact with other religions.

The four taxonomies that Hunt offers (transnational Islam, international Islam, principled Islam, and Sufism), however, seek to define different practices of Islam according to how "Muslims articulate and embody a narrative description of their identity" (Hunt, *supra*). Hunt defines "narrative" as ways to describe the different origins of Islam as a religious movement, which is then closely followed by "plot," the story of how Islam interacted and continues to interact with the non-Muslim world. Hunt argues that defining categories of Islam in this way helps reveal some of the more critical differences between Christians and Muslims and in doing so hopefully facilitates a more fruitful interreligious dialogue.

Hunt's four taxonomies of Islam are as follows: transnational Islam understands itself as the recipient of God's full revelation in the Qur'an, a divinely mandated order that provides guiding laws for the universe that all people are to obey and carry out. International Islam is a unification of different ethno-cultural groups and nation-states whereby local custom, state initiated law, and revealed law provide order for society. Principled Islam finds its primary identity in its commitment to principles such as justice, equity, rights and obligations, and mutual concern and applies those principles in new and changing situations. Finally, Sufism is an Islamic mysticism wherein submission to God's law is only a small part of the larger journey of the human to eventually be fully in the presence of the Divine Being.

While Hunt argues that his four taxonomies are rooted in practicing Muslims' own narrative description of their religious identities, Hunt's use of narrative in these taxonomies seems to be focused on the story of a religion and less concerned with the individual lives that embody and comprise that religion. The taxonomies according to narrative that he offers bring interreligious dialogue participants to a macro level of interaction by inviting them to see both themselves and each other according to broad categories that define the multiple ways in which individuals understand their religious identities. In other words, Hunt's four taxonomies define not what it means to be a Muslim (different practices of a religion), but how a Muslim might define that for himself (ways in which people understand themselves as participants of a religion).

Hunt argues that since these categories focus on the broader story of a religion and how it interacts with other religions, the categories are then generally applicable to other religions beyond Islam. Said another way, there is a Christian equivalent to Hunt's transnational Islam, and if participants of interreligious dialogue are able to understand what categories they and their conversation partners fall under, they will be able to have a more fruitful dialogue. They will be able to better see the places where their stories

INTERRELIGIOUS™
DIALOGUE

A forum for academic, social, and timely issues affecting religious communities around the world.

(the ways in which they understand themselves as participants of a religion) either overlap or limit their interactions with others.

My primary critique of Hunt's piece is that while he replaces old categories of religious self-understanding with new categories that supposedly facilitate more fruitful interreligious conversations, I am cautious about the degree to which categories are helpful. My critique is threefold critique: first, religious identity is only part of the full narrative of the individual. For example, I suspect that though I self-identify as a Lutheran (a principled Lutheran according to Hunt's taxonomies), my narrative of my religious identity is only part of a larger story - the complex, beautiful, entire story of Kari.

Second, to reduce a person's full narrative into a category of religious self-understanding is ultimately to limit a person's ability to fully express herself, hear others, and feel heard, which consequently restricts interreligious dialogue. The specifics of my individual narrative (the ways in which I understand myself as a self) deeply inform my religious identity, and if I am expected to speak as a category and not a full self, it is likely that I will not be a fully present conversation partner engaged on a level of shared meaning-making.

Finally, Hunt's categorization presupposes that the quality of interreligious dialogue can be measured and that an academic model can affect that quality. Though I would love to think that an academic model could help bring forth fruit in arguably one of the most strained interreligious relationships, I know from my own participation in interreligious work that storytelling and story receiving is a somewhat ambiguous process with often immeasurable outcomes.

In conclusion, Hunt's four taxonomies provide a helpful framework for thinking academically about interreligious dialogue and stand as a helpful starting point for that dialogue in real practice. I suspect, however, that the complex realities of interreligious dialogue and the messiness of storytelling serve to remind us that we must always be careful not to be too confident in painting with a broad brush. That is to say that though it may be helpful to be able to identify people in different categories of religious identity, I suspect it may be equally (if not more) helpful to see people beyond those taxonomies or at least hear the stories of how they got there. We all inhabit spaces that are fuzzy, and I suspect we do our conversation partners and ourselves a disservice when we see the world too categorically.

Kari Aanestad is a Master of Divinity student at Luther Seminary preparing for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Kari recently returned from an 18-month residency in Oxford, England where she served as a hospital chaplain under the supervision of one of the United Kingdom's top leaders in medical ethics. She also served as a pastoral intern at Saint Columba's United Reformed Church, the only public, church-affiliated LGBTQ ally in Oxford's city center. Her ministry is continually defined by a love of stories and academic curiosity.