

From the Guest Editor

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In April 2022, the Comparative Theology Area doctoral students and candidates at the Boston College Theology Department hosted our 19th Annual Engaging Particularities conference, inviting 15 participants from around the world to share their latest findings and perspectives on understanding religions, religious diversity, and comparative theology. This event emphasized valuing and appreciating each religion’s particularity while gaining insights from an interreligious and dialogical environment. It marked a significant milestone in our academic and personal journeys, as it was the first major indoor conference most of us attended since the COVID lockdown in Spring 2020. Reuniting with fellow scholars and engaging in face-to-face discussions rekindled our sense of collegiality, providing us with an immense magnitude of fresh energy and inspiration. We sincerely hope that participants gained momentum not only from the intellectual exchange but also from the scholarly fellowship, which will serve as a source of inspiration for years to come.

The planning committee chose liberation theologies as the theme due to their growing significance in the contemporary world—especially for comparative theology and interreligious dialogue. During the conference, the participants discussed fruitfully how each religion understands liberation and the marginalized, examining the convergences and divergences in these understandings. We also considered how one religion can be constructively informed by another on the topic of liberation. Furthermore, we explored how various liberation theologies enhance comparative theology, interreligious dialogue, and other disciplines. Our discourse demanded serious consideration of the particularity, not only of religion, but also of human persons in terms of their diverse racial, cultural, and gender identities and experiences.

That year, the keynote address was delivered by Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, who played a crucial role in the initial vision and planning of Engaging Particularities conferences during her doctoral studies at Boston College two decades ago. Her keynote speech, “Transformational

Liberation in the Age of COVID-19,” has been published in a Festschrift for Francis X. Clooney, one of the founders of the discipline of comparative theology as we know it today.¹

We are very grateful for the opportunity to work once again with the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (JIRS) to share a sample of the conference presentations. As one of the longest-running graduate student conferences in North America, Engaging Particularities strives to provide a platform for scholars and scholars-in-information to advance their academic pursuits. Participants are encouraged to focus on the theme of the year to facilitate more concentrated discussions and intellectual cross-pollination. The articles selected for publication here in JIRS Issue 42 demonstrate how the Engaging Particularities conference fosters critical reflection on the interplay between different religious traditions, offering novel insights and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in cross-religious engagements.

Cait Duggan’s article, “Theology of Prayer after Auschwitz: Elie Wiesel and Johann Baptist Metz in Conversation,” presents a nuanced analysis of how Johann Baptist Metz’s political theology responds to Elie Wiesel’s profound challenge to post-Shoah theology. Through careful and respectful engagement with these two important thinkers in a simulated dialogue, Duggan argues that Metz’s emphasis on prayer fulfills Wiesel’s criteria for a meaningful theological response to the Holocaust. As this article seeks to illustrate, Metz’s theology does not avoid the troubling questions of suffering; rather, it engages deeply with them, thus demonstrating that it is possible to develop a Christian response to the Holocaust by incorporating the prayers of Auschwitz’s victims in a way that honors memory, demands accountability, and resists apathy. By comparing Metz’s theological framework with Wiesel’s insistence on remembering the dead and questioning God, Duggan shows how Metz provides a robust, practical theology that integrates the moral imperatives and existential inquiries in a way that resonates with Wiesel’s visions and demands. It is an inspiring example of how, through engaging Jewish thought honestly, Christian theology can identify compelling models to address the profound moral and existential crises posed by the Holocaust.

In “‘It Is Not in Heaven’ (Deut 30:12): On the Vulnerability of Religious Knowledge as a Starting Point for Comparative Theology,” Elisa Koch investigates the epistemic vulnerability inherent in religious knowledge. Koch engages Yan Suarsana’s poststructuralist framework for the purpose of deconstructing traditional notions of religious truth. She presents the Talmudic story of the Oven of Akhnai as a pivotal case study. Her close reading and meticulous analysis reframe the story’s implications, demonstrating how communal and social vulnerabilities are not merely theoretical constructs. Rather, they are practical realities that must be acknowledged in interreligious dialogue. Koch advocates for the consideration of the role of vulnerability in ethical and productive interreligious discourses. Her interpretation of the famous Talmudic story serves to challenge theologians across religious borders to embrace reflexively the precariousness of their own epistemological and social conditions.

Kate Middleton’s article, “Fear and Virtuous Action: Applying Accounts of Fear by al-Ghazālī and Thomas Aquinas to a Study of an Historical Case of Injustice,” presents a

¹ Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, “Transformational Liberation in the Age of COVID-19: A Comparative Theology of ‘the Good Woman,’” in Axel M. Oaks Takacs and Joseph L. Kimmel, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney*, SJ (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2024), 249-259.

groundbreaking comparative analysis of fear as conceptualized by two eminent theologians from the Islamic and Christian traditions, respectively. By bringing together al-Ghazālī’s pastoral psychology from “The Book of Fear and Hope” and Aquinas’ intricate categorizations of fear within the *Summa Theologiae*, Middleton provides a nuanced discourse on how fear, far from being merely an emotion, actually functions as a motivator for virtuous action. The extraordinary contribution of this article lies in its application of these theological insights to the historical context of Japanese American internment during World War II in order to provide a vivid illustration of fear’s role in both social oppression and ethical resistance. The innovative combination of historical case analysis with theological reflection illustrates compellingly how multidisciplinary approaches—especially ones that draw sources from multiple religious traditions—contribute to the illustration of the numerous ways fear is cultivated, ordered, and manifested within communities.

Finally, Xiaodi Wu’s article, “Tillich and *Laozi*: Revealing the Existential and Religious Depth of Experiences of Migration,” explores the existential and religious dimensions of migration through an interdisciplinary approach, examining the perspectives of Christian theologian Paul Tillich and the Daoist classic *Laozi*. Utilizing Tillich’s concept of the polar structure of reality and *Laozi*’s dialectical approach in the *Daodejing*, the article delves into how migrants navigate the tensions and contradictions inherent in their experiences. Wu underscores the contrasting interpretations of these tensions: Tillich’s view of anxiety and despair versus *Laozi*’s acceptance and harmony. This article weaves together psychodynamic theory, comparative theology, and practical therapeutic frameworks—specifically, the multicultural orientation framework (MCO). Thus, this essay enriches understandings of migration while presenting religious traditions as important resources that could offer nuanced insights into the spiritual and existential challenges faced by migrants. As well, it introduces culturally sensitive interventions that acknowledge the profound impact of culturally embedded beliefs and values in their meaning-making processes.

In conclusion, please permit me to convey the conference planning committee’s gratitude for the continuing success of Engaging Particularities—success made possible by generosity in many forms. We are deeply grateful for the financial support of Boston College’s Institute for the Liberal Arts and the Boston Theological Interreligious Consortium. Our home program, the Boston College Theology Department—especially the faculty of the Comparative Theology Area—provided invaluable assistance with funding and marketing while offering valuable guidance, resources, and encouragement. Our talented and dedicated colleagues—especially Domenik Ackermann, Dorie Goehring, Megan Hopkins, and Greg Mileski—were tireless in their efforts in overcoming challenges and making the conference a reality. For all of that, we are profoundly thankful. Finally, we extend our sincere appreciation to Axel M. Oaks Takacs for cultivating the conference’s partnership with the JIRS, which has allowed us to participate in a larger conversations among scholars worldwide and make a wider impact in the relevant fields and disciplines.

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