

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

Visions and Visionaries: Animating Texts, Liberative Experiences, Contemporary Realities

We live in a world of deep space telescopes and electron microscopes—a world in which we seem to be able to see everything that is. We also navigate a precarious balance—teetering between sustainability and catastrophe, democracy and authoritarianism, pluralism and fundamentalism, progress and revanchist chauvinism. These observations may lead us to ponder how we will confront such a moment from theological perspectives—especially when considering the nature of our pursuit of interreligious dialogue and mutual learning. For two decades, the *Engaging Particularities* conference had given graduate students and emerging scholars an avenue for discussing current trends and themes—and their own research—in the fields of comparative theology, interfaith studies, comparative religions, and related disciplines. Clearly, its twentieth iteration would require a theme capable of opening the discussion to address the current technological, political, and ideological realities. Hence, for the convening in March 2023, participants were invited to focus on “Visions and Visionaries: Animating Texts, Liberative Experiences, Contemporary Realities.”

The theme for 2023 had an eschatological touch with good reason. On the one hand, it acknowledged the juncture at which conference participants currently found themselves globally, politically, and environmentally. When looking into the past of many religious traditions, moments of similar gravity were met by visionaries, prophets, and visions that carry a way forward. Often, the past may hold keys for moving forward into the future. How, then, could visionaries and visionary texts speak to this juncture of our time? On the other hand, this theme reflected, perhaps inadvertently, questions about the directions in which comparative theology and interreligious studies are headed. Again, to envision the next generation of research, one may need to look back into history to learn from the past. This special issue comprises peer-reviewed article versions of select presentations from the twentieth

Engaging Particularities conference. Its four articles reflect the rich spectrum of approaches and scholarship emerging from our discussions. We invited thoughtful contributions from the conference that, in our view, prompted us to think critically and rethink some of the questions posed.

In “Material Encounter: The Agency of Objects in Otherworldly Experiences,” Joseph Kimmel argues that physical objects mediate visionary and otherworldly experiences. He compares a passage in the Testament of Solomon regarding a ring inscribed with the divine Name YHWH to an amulet from the Black Sea region that contained incantations. Kimmel provides a convincing analysis and comparison, demonstrating that the inscription of divine names was seen to transfer divine power to humans in various ancient traditions. His approach also reflects a frequent new shift in comparative theology, particularly in challenging binaries between body and mind, as well as the spiritual and physical realms.

Catherine Cornille’s contribution, “Models of Convergence in Comparative Theology,” encourages us to reflect on the field of comparative theology by examining its emergence. Cornille discusses how all comparative theological discourses imply a notion of convergence and outlines various models of such convergence. She argues that comparative theology “requires some sense of commonality with other religious traditions, whether in shared questions, a shared origin, similar processes of religious reasoning, and/or a shared destiny and goal” (11). Thus, the idea of convergence may serve as a motivation to identify such commonality.

In “Blessed be the Strangers,” Azeel Azab argues that the eschatological Islamic idea of strangerhood, derived from a hadith, provides a conceptual history that can be used to create an ethical framework for addressing what Azab describes as the “Anthropocenic moment” of our time (3). Azab provides compelling examples of how the embodiment of strangerhood can manifest in practice.

Finally, Zachary Taylor’s contribution, “Time and the Ethical Subject,” compares Emmanuel Levinas’s idea of “diachronic time” with Augustine’s understanding of time and subjectivity. It asserts that Levinas’s notion of diachronic time, where subjectivity is formed in an immemorial past and shaped by encounters with others, informs Augustine’s belief that the human subject is established in an eternal relationship with God. Through Levinas’s lens, Taylor presents an Augustine who emphasizes that worshipping God includes, and even requires, ethical action and social responsibility.

I am grateful for the time and patience the authors of these articles invested in compiling their thoughts, and I am delighted by their rigor and

the excellence of the contributions that address the specifics. Of course, the conference and proceedings would not have been possible without my dear friend and co-organizer, Greg Mileski, who especially spearheaded its execution. I am grateful as well to Dorie Goehring, Megan Hopkins, Shinjae Lee, and Jess Navarette for the time they dedicated to making the conference possible. Finally, many thanks to Axel Takacs for allowing us to publish these articles in the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*.

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