

*From the Guest Editors*

**Perspective on Personhood: Comparative Insights into Self, Community, and Cosmos**

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The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Engaging Particularities conference at Boston College focused on the subject of personhood, one of the fundamental topics in theology and religious studies. Different religious traditions offer a variety of perspectives on what constitutes a human, and there are conflicting anthropological views even within individual religious traditions. General assumptions regarding Eastern and Western perspectives include cultural notions of individuality. On the one hand, in the West human beings are normatively perceived primarily as individuals, heavily informed by the Cartesian Self. On the other hand, in the East the notion of community and even the broader cosmos presumably take precedence over the individual. These assumptions tend to reduce the complexity of the anthropological question into a binary, and our conference aimed to complicate personhood from many different perspectives, providing a richly varied understanding of the person in connection to the Self/self, community, and cosmos.

This special issue marks the second cooperation between the Engaging Particularities (EP) committee and the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)*. As one of the longest-running graduate student conferences in North America, EP has successfully brought numerous scholars-in-training from various institutions and with diverse approaches in theology and religious studies to discuss a specific theme each year. Last year, revised versions of papers presented at the 2018 EP were published in a special issue of *JIRS* for the first time, and now we are delighted to have another cooperative initiative for papers presented at the 2019 conference. We look forward to another collaborative special issue for the 2020 EP conference, whose theme is “Living Rituals through Memory, Language, and Identity.”

The EP committee is comprised of graduate students from Boston College’s Theology Department who are specializing in Comparative Theology. The conference is intended to be a venue for interdisciplinary discourse, and we highlight the comparative insights of the conference in a new theme each year. The call for papers of the 2019 EP asked several questions. What does it mean to be a person? Whether it is as a body or from within a body, as a Self or a self, as an essence or a social construction, or as a marriage of multiple constituents, it is from a perspective of personhood that our engagement with the world begins. How do we define, imagine, discover, or construct our sense of what it means to exist in relationship? How do religious conceptions of divine personhood and embodiment—or the rejection of these categories for the divine—reflect and impact the perception of human personhood and embodiment? How are religious texts, rituals, and traditions altered or reinterpreted in the light of shifting notions of self in modernity? The five articles in this special edition highlight a few of the insights these questions generated. Each author

is working with a different religious tradition, presented comparatively with a second religious or philosophical tradition, with the ultimate goal of fleshing out some aspect(s) of personhood.

### **Format**

Professor Michelle Voss Roberts, Principal of Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto, delivered an engaging keynote address and adapted her lecture for this journal issue. “Practicing the Image of God: How Ritual Can Retrain the Elephant” incorporates feminist theologies and ritual studies from the Christian tradition and places them in dialogue with Hindu Tantric ritual theories. Voss Roberts introduces anti-bias training’s metaphor, in which the elephant is the subconscious and the seated rider atop it represents the thinking mind. Anti-bias training reveals that while many believe they are free from bias because in their thinking mind (the rider) they know discrimination is wrong, there are implicit cultural norms (the elephant) that need to be identified to work towards a just society. Voss Roberts suggests that the non-dual Śaiva symbol of the divine, mirrored in humanity, furthers diversity in Christian symbols of the image of God to include body, emotion, and subtle states of consciousness. A holistic anthropology can thus retrain riders as well as elephants.

Secondly, Mariah Cushing explores Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical concept of prejudice and its application within the field of comparative theology. Gadamer asserts the necessity of prejudice, as it is unavoidable and it is precisely through prejudice that one encounters and is able to learn from the other. Cushing engages the new wave of comparative theology and the modern social scientific use of prejudice, and ultimately seeks to provide a Gadamerian hermeneutical model that will enhance the new wave of comparative theology. Reinterpreting the meaning of prejudice, relying on Gadamer’s hermeneutics, can affect the exploration of one’s understanding of the self and the other. Comparative theology, centering around encounters with otherness, provides fertile ground for this contemporary meaning of prejudice.

Greg Mileski places Charles Taylor’s buffered self in conversation with Thich Nhat Hanh’s Zen Buddhist teaching of interbeing. Taylor’s buffered self is a product of Western modernity, and is detached from the body, creation, and others that leaves us with a “malaise.” Taylor notes that Christian agapic love, in contrast, makes no distinction between the other and the self. The dissonance between Western modernity and Christianity thus leaves one with the impetus to care for others, but without the identification with the other. Mileski points to Thich Nhat Hanh’s interbeing to offer a solution for this predicament, where the self is instead fundamentally related to and unified with creation and with others. In this paradigm, the love of self continues naturally into loving the other as part of a cohesive identity. Mileski concludes by noting that this possibility could provide the grounds for a new social imaginary within Western Christianity, and would also generate insights into Divine relationality, as Christian agape is expanded upon through Interbeing.

The next article, by Shannon Wylie, compares two thinkers, one Muslim and one Christian, and their personalist proposals as an alternative for individualism. The two thinkers Wylie brings together are Mohamed Lahbabi (1922–93), a Muslim Moroccan philosopher, and John Paul II/Karol Wojtyła (1920–2005), the late Pope and a Catholic Polish philosopher. By situating each thinker in their own twentieth century religious contexts, Wylie’s article highlights the ways in which Lahbabi and John Paul II/Wojtyła were similarly concerned with bringing the insights rooted in their respective religious traditions regarding a person to address social-political issues relevant to their community. Their views of personhood are articulated in philosophical language, yet, at the same time, reflect the values of Islam and Christianity. In the end, both thinkers similarly propose that a person can only flourish in community and that understanding this perspective of personhood is crucial for overcoming societal issues and transforming society.

Finally, Bethany Slater offers a constructive comparative theology proposal on desire formation related to prayer from a Jewish liturgical practice perspective. Utilizing James K.A. Smith’s idea on the connection between liturgical prayer and the formation of Christian “social imaginary” and human desire, Slater proposes a Jewish account of liturgy as a desire-forming activity that corresponds to the faith of a community. For the Jewish interlocutor, she employs the notion of desire formation in Torah study as formulated by Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the modern Musar movement. Slater finds that Salanter’s definition of desire can be enriched by Smith’s, so that desire formation becomes a purpose of liturgical prayer. This new understanding could transform a practitioner’s habitual engagement with Jewish liturgy.

Overall, this issue addresses religious traditions’ anthropological claims through a comparative perspective, with the ultimate goal of rendering more inclusive and whole theological anthropologies. The authors struggle with modernity, Western notions of the self, biases and prejudices, individualism, desire, as they articulate a perspective on personhood. Through the comparative method, each author embodies the holistic notion they wish to articulate by demonstrating the relatedness of two seemingly incongruous entities. As we see in these five articles, approaching the fundamental topic of anthropology through comparison lends itself to a more inclusive understanding of the person.

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