

Writing Difference, Reading the World: A Roundtable of Ecumenical and Interreligious Journal Editors on the History and Future of a Shifting Field

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This article is a transcription of a discussion, held as part of the 2020 European Academy of Religion, among editors of five different journals whose purviews are ecumenical or interreligious studies:

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While the record of this conversation has already been published as Ecumenical Trends 50.1 (2021): 8–24, its presentation here includes further light editing and a brief preface by Axel M. Oaks Takács, Editor-in-Chief of this journal.

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Preface

As the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, I was pleased to partake in an online roundtable at the 2020 European Academy of Religion, organized by Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute and co-hosted by the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network. It was a fascinating and fruitful conversation in which we discussed the relationship between the older discipline of ecumenical studies and the newer field of interreligious studies, the political choices editorial teams must make, and the future of interreligious and ecumenical studies and education. Most importantly, the discussion addressed the topic of public scholarship and the role our journals play in being academic publications that seek the public good. I am excited to share the roundtable with our readership.

Axel M. Oaks Takács

Introduction

The 2020 European Academy of Religion featured an online roundtable discussion among editors of five journals whose purviews are ecumenical or interreligious studies, the focus of which was the history and future of a shifting academic field. Subsequently, the transcript of that conversation was distilled and collaboratively edited by the participants, yielding a more polished and unified effort by the editors of diverse English-language ecumenical/interreligious journals to consider how their respective scholarly vehicles seek to make sense of the unstable borders and frontiers in the field; and, furthermore, to consider how these journals deal (and should deal) with matters of public urgency in which religious difference and division are implicated. Ultimately, the dialogue below represents a mutual effort to take stock of how these five journals, each of them in a different institutional context and position on the ecumenical landscape, contribute to shaping a shifting field and to serving a public whose religious differences are always being negotiated on common and contested ground.

Following brief discussions of the history and priorities of each journal, the roundtable continues with open-ended discussion of the issues at hand, again collaboratively edited to produce a document of genuine “ecumenical” quality in reflecting from several divergent perspectives on the shared future of our work between the academy, religious institutions, and the public sphere.

Stephen G. Brown, for *The Ecumenical Review*.

The Ecumenical Review is the oldest of the ecumenical journals under consideration here, with its first issue appearing in the week before the founding Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), in Amsterdam in 1948. The identity of *The Ecumenical Review* has, of course, been closely connected to the WCC (which today brings together about 350 churches from mainly Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and independent backgrounds), but its history goes back even further back—to the 1930s and the discussions to bring together the two great ecumenical movements of the time: *Faith & Order* and *Life & Work*.

The establishment of an authoritative ecumenical journal was identified as one of the seven tasks for the projected WCC, even in advance of the Council’s founding. That task was fulfilled, and over its more than 70-year existence *The Ecumenical Review* has been published by the

WCC as a forum for debate and discussion about burning ecumenical issues. It has been a chronicler of the activities of the WCC, but also has sought to balance the WCC’s ecumenical vision and reality with activities and scholarship taking place beyond its institutional boundaries. In other words, although it has been and continues to be published by the WCC, the *Ecumenical Review* is not the Council’s official organ.

In his introduction to the first issue in 1948, Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft (the first General Secretary of the WCC and the founding editor of *The Ecumenical Review*) spoke of the journal being part of the “ecumenical conversation” between churches, bringing them together in true fellowship. Yet, at the same time, this ecumenical conversation needed to reflect a struggle for that truth that transcends all churches and human beings. Visser ’t Hooft’s editorial articulated a hope that readers would not only tolerate but welcome “uncompromising frankness of speech” around difficult and controversial matters. Without this, he said, “how can we come closer to each other?”

And so, one of the key tasks for the *Review* in the first years of its existence was to widen the ecumenical conversation beyond the members of the WCC, to include in the conversation those churches that were not part of the institutional ecumenical movement. For example, even if there was at the time no institutional relationship between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, the pages of the *Review* were open to Catholic scholars (such as Yves Congar); so too, the Russian Orthodox Church was not then a WCC member, yet the *Review* offered ongoing assessment of ecclesiological developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

In a way, although there were very few (if any) endowed chairs in ecumenical studies or ecumenical theology, *The Ecumenical Review* offered itself as what we might today want to call a virtual department of ecumenical studies and theology. For example, during the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, the *Review* undertook a rigorous and much-valued commentary on the Council’s developments.

So much for the beginnings of *The Ecumenical Review*. But where would we locate it today? I would say that the journal has essentially four main functions. First, it continues to articulate the ecumenical vision or visions, and it offers a space for debate and discussion on the challenges facing the ecumenical movement. Second, it strives to be an academic resource and to stimulate research, including interaction between theological or ecclesiological discourse and the secular scholarly disciplines. Third, the *Review* maintains the ecumenical memory and history, serving as a trusted repository of that history. Finally, and not least importantly, it supports ecumenical education and formation, helping to nurture each new generation of ecumenical scholars and researchers.

In this light, we can consider how *The Ecumenical Review* engages with interreligious issues and with what might be called extra-religious issues (or “non-theological” issues). Maybe this is too simple an answer, but the World Council of Churches is concerned with the whole of the *oikoumenē*, the whole inhabited world, which cannot be tidily portioned up into Christian and non-Christian, religious and secular. I already mentioned how the *Review* was the product of efforts to bring together the movements of Life & Work (which dealt with issues of society and how churches needed to work together to deal with the realities of violence, injustice, and eventually ecological disintegration) and Faith & Order (which sought to find ways to overcome the

confessional differences between churches by way of theological and ecclesiological discussions). Accordingly, the focus of the *Review* has always been wider than doctrinal or theological considerations. While for some interpreters the focus of discussions about ecumenism and the ecumenical movement is fixed very firmly on explicit efforts for inter-confessional unity, neither the WCC nor *The Ecumenical Review* has ever considered its mandate to be limited in this way.

At the same time, there have been different priorities in the foreground at different phases in the history of the *Review*. In the 1950s and early 1960s, for instance, there was a strong focus on what would be needed to open up the ecumenical movement from being a largely Protestant endeavor to something more diverse, including the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. Later, in the late 1960s and the 1970s, it became more of a forum for conversation among the WCC's member churches with particular emphasis on issues related to church and society, not least the struggle against racism.

It is also important to point out that *The Ecumenical Review* is only one of three journals produced by the World Council of Churches, alongside the *International Review of Mission* (whose history goes back even further, being founded in 1912, two years after the great international missionary conference in Edinburgh), and *Current Dialogue* (which this year celebrates its 40th anniversary and was one of the first journals, if not the first, to deal primarily with interfaith or interreligious relations). This does not mean, of course, that *The Ecumenical Review* ignores issues of mission or interreligious relations; it is a matter of relative emphasis, as the three journals are intended to complement each other.

So it is not the case that *The Ecumenical Review* is moving in a direction that many departments of ecumenical studies have moved, that is, by bringing interreligious issues more to the core of its purview, or by situating ecumenical issues as a subset or sidecar to reflection on interreligious challenges. And yet, again, the focus of the *Review* does need to reflect the realities of the *oikoumenē*: if “ecumenical” signifies the real conditions of our one, inhabited earth, it must include understanding of and concern for interreligious relations. We have indeed expanded our vision over the years, not by prioritizing interfaith relationships as such (*Current Dialogue* already does this well), but by charting the interfaces of the church and the Christian ecumenical movement with wider issues in society (including, but not limited to, the ways that these issues animate other religious communities). For example, recent issues have dealt with the theology of the Oikos, with the created world and environmental sustainability, with global manifestations of racism, and with the ecumenical challenges of speaking truth in a digital age. And this past year, an issue focused on the power of Christ's love in the midst of pandemic: what are the fundamental issues that COVID-19 has raised for theology, for churches in their life and worship, and for the wider society?

Finally, in terms of the audience of *The Ecumenical Review*, I think we could speak in terms of three overlapping circles. The first is that of theologians and scholars, what we might call the academic audience. The second would be the circle of ecumenical leaders and staff in World Council of Churches member churches as well as in other churches and agencies worldwide who value the insights appearing in the journal. And the third, widest circle is that of the ecumenical public: ecumenically or globally minded Christians, or indeed those of any tradition who wish to understand the common and contested life of the churches. Looking back over the last 70 years or so, we can see a shift in the journal's focus in terms of those three publics or three core

audiences: a shift from the wider ecumenical public, which I think was the primary audience in the early days when the conversation had to be carried on beyond the institutional boundaries of any church, through to the 1960s and 1970s, when member church staff and leadership were taking greater responsibility for interchurch affairs, now to the present with greater prominence on the academic core of theologians and scholars, while at the same time offering the *Review* (like the other WCC journals) as a resource for ecumenical fellowship. Throughout this history, an animated dialogue has continued between ecumenical theology and wider conversations in the academic world, across a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches to urgent contemporary problems.

Terry Rey, for the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*:

Like *The Ecumenical Review*, with its birth coinciding with a major turning point in twentieth-century ecumenical history, the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (JES) was founded by two Roman Catholic theologians (Leonard and Arlene Swidler) in 1964—in the midst of and directly inspired by the Second Vatican Council. At the time, Len Swidler was on the faculty at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. He held a doctorate in history from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, as well as a licentiate in Catholic theology from University of Tübingen. While in Germany, he had befriended and worked closely with Professor Hans Küng, who was one of the most liberal and ecumenically minded theologians involved in the Council and, of course, one of the giants of Catholic theology in our time. This background inspired Len in founding the journal along with his wife Arlene, who was an acclaimed author and theologian in her own right (working especially on women in the Catholic Church) and who became the managing editor of JES. In 1966, when Len took a faculty position at Temple University in Philadelphia, JES came with him; it remains housed at Temple today.

JES was never only about ecumenism in the sense of inter-Christian conversations, as even in its earliest days it served as a platform for Jewish-Christian dialogue. Moreover, this interfaith horizon of the journal found a welcome place and supportive intellectual home at Temple because the Department of Religion was launched—after the university’s School of Theology departed in 1958—with an orientation in line with Max Mueller’s famous assertion that if you know only one religion, you do not know any at all. Swidler was one of the first members of this department, combining Catholic thought with interreligious dialogue.

By the end of the 1970s, the department counted 22 full-time tenure track faculty members and 175 doctoral students. However, things changed considerably in the last two decades of the twentieth century: the department shrank in size and, like most major programs in the field, it abandoned the “world religions” model with its perennialist implications. But the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* remained housed here, and it stayed consistent with its originating ethos of interfaith studies being completely integrated with scholarship on ecumenism (as conventionally understood). The journal also internationalized, with some of the world’s leading theologians and humanists serving on its editorial board over the years.

All the same, while it is generally accepted to be forward-thinking in terms of interfaith dialogue, the journal has been slow to accommodate more theoretically challenging approaches stemming from postmodern and postcolonial thought, which have had a resounding impact on

religious studies more broadly. Such claims as J. Z. Smith's that "religion" itself is a scholarly invention, for instance, do not seem to have shaped the contributions JES receives and publishes.

For much of the journal's history, it remained beholden to the world religions model that prevailed in the academy of religion. Until last year, there was not a single article published in JES on Bahá'í, and it is only this year that the very first article on Orisha devotion is appearing—this despite the fact that in our world today there are over 100 million people practicing some variant of traditional religion. And the world religions model has had other consequences for how the journal has framed the conversation taking place in its pages. The different terms with which we framed this conversation—ecumenical, interreligious, political or public (that is, including religious but not only religious)—are certainly worth distinguishing. However, from my perspective as an Africanist and a Caribbeanist, many distinctions we draw as scholars and religious leaders (between "religions" and "ideologies," or between "folk" and "world" religions) are situated in colonialist paradigms and forms of privilege that emerged out of a history of domination. This would signal to me the urgency for ecumenical and interreligious studies to do some serious self-reflection on the implications of such postcolonial insights.

In the three years that I have been tracking such things, the readership at JES seems to be in decline, and the number of articles submitted for our consideration is also declining. But this does not in itself indicate that the priorities of our readers are elsewhere. The proliferation of academic journals—some of which are for-profit, deceitful, and predatory—is surely part of the situation, as is the Open Access movement, which is gaining steam (and which, I would say, is a good thing on the whole). But this also poses challenges for JES, as I would imagine for all academic journals, especially ones that are underfunded and understaffed institutionally.

I certainly don't mean to sound pessimistic. Excellent scholarship is still being published in each issue of JES, and the journal is more diverse than ever, not just in terms of the subject matter, but also in terms of the identities of the authors who submit articles and the reviewers who applied on them over the last few years. For example, I would estimate that nearly 20% of our submissions have come from West Africa, especially Nigeria. This leads me to conclude with a word of caution for the field and the journals in particular: it is no fault of our own that English is the hypnotic language of academia, but as submissions are increasingly sent from non-English-speaking parts of the world, our journal is facing a mountain of challenges on the editing front. That could be partially my own fault for not wishing to reject an article simply because the English is faulty—this strikes me as unfair, especially when the submission is coming from a developing nation. For our journal to remain relevant on more than just an academic level, I believe it needs to invest more time and energy and hopefully funds into supporting such scholars in publishing their work, and not solely in English. But here again we are thrown against the harsh realities of a history of colonialism that are not easily disentangled.

Aaron Hollander, for *Ecumenical Trends*:

As we are proceeding in chronological order, introducing each journal in the order in which it was first published, *Ecumenical Trends* is the third that we will cover, before turning to the two dedicated interreligious studies journals.

Ecumenical Trends is the journal of Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, and it is conceived as a ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement. The history of this journal will be known to some, but I suspect not all, of our readers. *Trends* is much younger than the Society of the Atonement. It began in 1972 as a merger between two other periodicals. The first of these was known as *The Lamp*, which began to be published in 1903 by Fr. Paul Wattson, the founder of the Society of the Atonement. It was a monthly confessional periodical dedicated to Catholic life in the modern world, and the sense of “Catholic” here explicitly included Catholic life within the Anglican Church, to which Fr. Paul and his Society still belonged at that time. The motivating vision of *The Lamp*, then, was ecumenical, even as its ecumenical vision was what we would today call an “ecumenism of return,” aiming to instill Catholic values and orientations in the hope of facilitating the entry of “separated churches” into communion with Rome. After Fr. Paul’s death, however, *The Lamp* gradually shifted in focus, increasingly into analyses of issues of church and society—more along the lines of something like *Christianity Today*, in the sense of being a magazine meant for educated but popular consumption.

The second periodical that was merged into *Ecumenical Trends* was known as *Faith and Order Trends*, which was published by the National Council of Churches (NCC). This journal was intended to engage with the scholarly and theological issues at the forefront of ecumenical conversation, in the US context specifically. But by 1970, the NCC was struggling to keep publishing *Faith and Order Trends*, and Graymoor Ecumenical Institute (which was founded shortly after Vatican II and had not yet added “Interreligious” to its name) took over its publication, integrated its forward-looking “trends” approach with the accessibility of *The Lamp*, and replaced both periodicals with *Ecumenical Trends*. It is worth noting how similar the timing and logic are here to those of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. Vatican II’s injection of Catholic energy into the ecumenical movement and vice versa was in no small part responsible for both of these journals, even as their pages then and now are by no means limited to interpretations by Catholics.

So *Ecumenical Trends* became a hybrid vehicle, academically informed but publicly accessible, not only for engaging issues of church and society (as *The Lamp* prioritized) but also for reporting on current events and documents in the ecumenical sphere and inviting scholarly reflection on those developments. In terms of the relationship between the ecumenical and the interreligious components of the journal’s purview, it was in 1991 that Graymoor Ecumenical Institute was renamed Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute – the Institute as a whole (and *Ecumenical Trends* with it) was acknowledging and formalizing an expansion in scope that had been a long time coming. We can note again the significance of this specific timing: the World Council of Churches celebrated its Ninth General Assembly in Canberra (Australia), at which there was a robust Roman Catholic observational presence and at which interreligious issues had come very strongly into the foreground of ecumenical conversations. And, of course, the dissolution of the Soviet Union had redrawn the geopolitical map and opened mental space for new priorities of social and ethical engagement by the churches. But we need to appreciate that bringing interreligious questions into the ecumenical foreground is by no means a concession to contemporary predilections or fashions—these questions have been part of the ecumenical conversation from the very beginning, for instance in the reports of the World Missionary Conference of 1910, in which a commitment to understanding the social dynamics and intellectual texture of “the non-Christian world” was held to be completely indispensable for participants in the proto-ecumenism of the day.

Since 1991, then, *Ecumenical Trends* has provided a forum to wrestle and reckon with precisely the kinds of questions this forum is considering: not just with regard to the entanglement between interchurch and interreligious dynamics, but also with regard to the church and society questions that motivated *The Lamp*, now resolutely updated with a more capacious understanding of the churches' involvement (often in ways that escape conscious notice by the participants) in all manner of sociocultural challenges, divisions, and upheavals. We recognize also the divisions (and accordingly, the ecumenical imperatives) *within* and not only between religious communities—as these are, in many cases today, the divisions with the greatest power to corrode efforts at unity and peace. Recognizing the entanglement between “ecumenical” and “interreligious” issues is not about collapsing the two and making them synonymous (since, of course, encounters and discussions between those who identify as belonging in some way to “the same religion” are conditioned and oriented differently than those between people who do not). Rather, it is a recognition that each is always implied and entailed in the other, and that the distinctions get fuzzier the closer we look at them. Attending to this complexity is itself part of the purpose of holding these conversations together.

That said, there is still a tension that has to be negotiated here. *Ecumenical Trends* is a site for the exchange of different perspectives on ecumenical affairs, and there are plenty of authors and plenty of readers who would distinguish much more sharply between ecumenical and interreligious and political issues—up to and including the perspective that they should really be kept at arm's length from one another, rather than being allowed to impress upon the others' distinctive agendas. We may not share that perspective as editors, but we still need to reach and be in conversation with those who do share it; the challenge is to provide a space to accommodate real difference (hopefully within a horizon of shared commitment to productive, good-faith disagreement). When we come to a potentially divisive issue—and this goes not only for the general framing questions but specific theological, ecclesiological, ethical controversies as well—we have to be able to accept those tensions as themselves part of the ecumenical landscape, worthy of our consideration even and maybe especially if we disagree.

So the solution, I think, is neither to come down with an iron fist and say “our way or the highway,” nor to sidestep the questions and just say that anything goes. We still have to be able to proceed on the basis of moral and intellectual commitments with regard to the shape and purpose of the field—likewise when we produce issues of *Ecumenical Trends* dealing with, for example, the legacy of slavery and the complicity of the churches in systemic racism. We take these kinds of engagements to be morally justified and necessary, but we recognize that they may be potentially alienating to precisely those members of our society and our churches with whom it is most urgent to be in ongoing communication on these topics. There is, of course, a clear parallel here with what happens in ecumenical/interreligious conversations themselves.

Ecumenical Trends is intended to be responsive to current and emerging realities, and therefore to what is most needful in our moment, in our context. But this applies not only to the contents of our issues, but also to the role that we are or could be playing as a journal in order to help strengthen relationships and heal divisions between (and within) religious communities, supporting constructive religious interaction in the public sphere. And in this sense, we are obligated to open up to new questions, potentially very uncomfortable questions, questions that we or the ecumenical movement may not yet have thought ourselves equipped to engage, which nevertheless are shaping our moment and demand our attention. For example: young people are

thinking about and engaging in religious ideas and practices in ways that are flagrantly misunderstood and misrepresented, both in the media and in mainstream ecumenical conversations about youth and religion. We have to be thinking about evangelical and Pentecostal perspectives on faith and society in more textured ways than have been customary. We have to be thinking about multiple religious belonging, and we have to be not just hand-wringing over “the nones” but engaging in actual ecumenical conversations that take those perspectives into account and take them seriously. We have to be thinking about the deepening polarization in the US and much more broadly around the world as a kind of sectarianism, which is in desperate need of ecumenical analysis and intervention, being theologically saturated even when it is not explicitly coded as religious.

Our perspective at *Ecumenical Trends* is that the field—not only the academic guilds of ecumenical studies and interreligious studies but also the many others who are dedicated to negotiating religious difference and overcoming religious division – dare not ignore these kinds of questions. And if “ecumenical trends” is going to mean anything, it has to mean having the courage and creativity to stick our nose into newly emerging issues, seeing what turns up and what it might mean for our communities, even when we do not have decades of prior precedent for doing so.

Axel Takács, for the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*:

The *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (JIRS) was founded in 2009, so we have come to the journals native to the twenty-first century. JIRS was originally the creation of two graduate students: Stephanie Varnon-Hughes was at Union Theological Seminary, and Rabbi Joshua Stanton was attending rabbinical school in Jerusalem. As they were assessing the resources available to them, there seemed to be a dearth of journals, in the libraries of religious and theological studies, that were dedicated explicitly to interreligious work. At the same time, they noticed an increasing number of graduate students and younger scholars working at the intersection of multiple religions, some doing so confessionally and others non-confessionally, and many in tandem with interfaith organizations beyond the academy. Some were involved directly in interreligious dialogue and others were engaged more behind the scenes in analyzing what was taking place in their own or in other contexts, but these younger scholars all shared a commitment to working in more than one religious tradition and working on questions of public significance at the interfaces between traditions. It was a sort of liminal space, involving comparative work, some ecumenical questions, a mix of dialogue and scholarship, a mix of confessional and academic and activist approaches. And there was a gap, at least in the North American context: where (for example) could an interfaith community organizer publish an academic reflection on their own work in the field as a scholar-practitioner or an activist-theologian? There needed, in other words, to be a space to discuss in a scholarly way what was already flourishing on the ground.

JIRS sought to be that space wherein to consider what is happening in this or that community or institution, and to consider what works, what doesn’t work, and so forth. Interreligious studies itself was imagined as an interdisciplinary field; the journal aimed to be a conduit for publishing and communicating what was going on in that field. I would describe the purview of JIRS as being the second-order analysis of first-order interreligious work. That first-order interreligious work might be theological in nature, in the sense of dialogues on theological problems or traditions, or it might be more pragmatic in nature, for instance with regard to

interfaith justice work or the relationships between religious communities in a shared social landscape, but in either case the work of interreligious studies as a scholarly field is to take a step back and consider what's happening, and why, and to what effect.

The journal's audience turned out to be—perhaps unsurprisingly—quite broad, not only in the academy (with people teaching or writing in interreligious studies) but also people involved professionally or para-professionally with interfaith dialogue. We do publish, then, our fair share of theory-driven pieces, but a lot of the articles deal more with discussions of best practices in pedagogy, community leadership, interfaith organizing, and so forth. JIRS is meant as a resource for on-the-ground work, for people who might want to implement some version of what they learned in an article, but in turn, this pragmatic emphasis is itself highly informative for those doing the second-order analysis of interfaith processes.

Now, as editor-in-chief for the last four or five years, I have worked to reimagine the journal as making space also for public theology, as well as for a kind of interreligious reassessment of religious studies as such, where interdisciplinary and intersectional analyses have underscored how race, class, gender, sexuality, and more, all constitute the contexts in which interreligious actors and leaders operate. If anything, what the study of religion has demonstrated is that all religion is in effect *inter-religion*. Whether we are speaking of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or other traditions, all emerge (and continue to emerge, rather than ever being pinpointable as something fixed and entire) in conversation with the cultures and religions that are already present around them. No religious tradition emerges in a vacuum, and no tradition can remain in a vacuum, even when attempts are made to isolate it and keep it from contamination. Even the imagination of religious others, and the articulation of a tradition's distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* other possibilities, constitute an interreligiosity that cannot be extracted or sidelined in assessing what that tradition is. This way of thinking about religion is, of course, a departure from and critique of older twentieth-century models for the study of religion, which relied on the careful *disentanglement* of traditions, the demarcation of boundaries where one tradition ended and another began, the creation of essences of each religion, and the careful work of distinguishing, for example, religion from magic, religion from secular ideology, religion from other cultural forms and processes, and so forth. Likewise, in theological studies, a parallel argument can be made – that theological ideas and the ways of articulating and addressing theological problems have all developed in the context of negotiating religious difference, negotiating multiple religious cultures. All theology, in this respect, is interreligious theology – even if it is not often self-consciously interpreted this way.

Part of the function of JIRS, then, is to offer the opportunity to explore and work through what it means for the study of religion, and for the pursuit of theology, when these recognitions are taken seriously, when this interreligious quality that is so often in the background is instead underscored or elevated into conscious consideration. Some examples would be helpful. How, for instance, would a scholar of South Asian religions write an article on Muslims practicing yoga in the sixteenth-century Mughal Empire – not just as an area studies piece, but highlighting the interreligious nature of the phenomenon and developing theory on that basis? Or, how might a Christian theologian write an article on early Native Mexican devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe? Certainly, interreligious analyses could be productive in considering – like Terry signaled – how Yoruba devotional traditions have interacted with Christianity and Islam, both in Africa and in Latin America. And the list goes on.

Presently, JIRS is published by Boston University School of Theology, Hebrew College, (which now houses the Miller Center for Interreligious Leadership), and Hartford Seminary. It needs to triangulate and integrate those institutions’s various priorities, but the structure also functions to spread out responsibilities by drawing inspiration from the different institutional contexts, based on the academic expertise housed at each. This is one working model of collaboration that has been successful so far—a model that allows us, hopefully, to meet the challenge of holding very diverse work together in one framework.

To summarize where the JIRS stands in terms of this big-picture problem of defining the field, drawing boundaries, and so forth, please allow me to begin by saying that I really appreciate the definition of interreligious studies provided by Kate McCarthy in the book *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018: 12). I want to share it, since it proves very helpful in framing what JIRS is trying to do as well. Interreligious studies, as McCarthy describes it, “is a sub-discipline of religious studies that engages in the scholarly and religiously-neutral description, and in the multidisciplinary analysis and theoretical framing, of the interactions of religiously-different people in groups, including at the intersections of religion and secularity. It examines these interactions in historical and contemporary contexts and in relation to other social systems and forces. And, like other disciplines with applied dimensions, it aims to serve the public good by bringing its analyses to bear on practical approaches to issues in religiously-diverse societies.”

I would add, however, that as an editor I have tried to give an increased attention to interreligious theology or theological work written by scholars who are confessionally religious—whether they are part of a community’s leadership or not—and who are trying to bring the public aspect of their studies into the foreground. As far as the non-confessional or non-theological articles approach interreligious studies, they tend to be about how religious communities and traditions intersect with aspects of secularity: the state, the economy, public education, geopolitical forces, international or intercultural tensions, and so forth. This is all very important but not sufficient for getting at the full picture of what interreligious studies is or could be. Insofar as the history of interreligious work is indebted to ecumenical studies, it has to leave room for the conditions of ecumenical division and exchange (which are often robustly theological), insofar as these are clearly entailed in interreligious relations, whose players are engaged in all manner of “intra” religious negotiations. This is not to say that there’s anything wrong with interreligious studies dedicating sustained attention to the secular social sciences or the so-called secular dimensions of religious interactions. As Aaron was saying, we keep realizing through the many critical lenses available to us that none of these interactions are happening in a vacuum, and none are adequately understood if we fail to engage with these secular or non-theological aspects.

I would say that interreligious studies, and thus also the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, is in a way a natural offshoot of one of the most important takeaways from the study of religion in the late twentieth century, as I mentioned before: religious beliefs and practices and identities cannot be viewed as isolated causes of individual or group behavior. Just as nobody’s identity is *only* as “a Christian” or “a Muslim,” so too nobody’s religious affiliation is “the single cause” of their political activity, whether peaceful or violent. Accordingly, as we have increasingly recognized how religion is infused with and responsive to cultural, social, political, and economic values, and

is often sponsored by national authorities or financially powerful institutions, we have needed more sophisticated intellectual tools for viewing the interactions between religious communities in this same light—and not only the interactions between what we recognize as religious traditions (in that “world religions” sense that Terry was discussing) but also the interactions and exchange between contemporary imaginaries or ideologies, such as capitalism, nationalism, and so forth, which can shape people’s lives in ways that cannot be so unambiguously distinguished from religious influence. Whereas thirty or forty years ago, articles would be written on why a certain religious belief causes or does not cause a particular political behavior, JIRS aspires to attend productively and diversely to these complex forces at play, not reducing any of them to another or essentializing any of them as belonging to a fixed conception of a given religious tradition. Religious studies came to appreciate—and now interreligious studies brings this appreciation into the foreground—that the reality is much more complicated and in need of more sensitive instruments of interpretation.

Nelly van Doorn-Harder, for *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*:

These many academic and para-academic dynamics that Axel has been discussing, I think, are very closely connected with the reasons that underlie the emergence of my own journal, *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* (ISIT), albeit with some important differences given the European context rather than the American context.

ISIT was founded only in 2015, with its first issue released in 2016. The background here is that the movement of studying interreligious engagement, along with what they call intercultural theology in Europe, was very much driven by individuals. In Amsterdam there was Henk Vroom, who, in cooperation with several national and international colleagues, founded in the 1980s a journal called *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* (SID), which he edited almost up to his death in 2014. Then in 2005, in connection with SID, Vroom launched the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS). I remember being at the founding meeting for ESITIS, and I was extremely ticked off, I must say, because they were talking about and celebrating the “founding fathers” of the society, with a podium full of men only. For a couple of years, I could not help thinking that this was a major blind spot in thinking about whose insights and priorities would shape the field.

But over time, Henk and I started to work together at the Center for Islamic Theology that he had launched at the Free University of Amsterdam. And as the network widened into other European countries, Africa, Asia, and the USA, and as new questions began to be raised that were closely or loosely connected with the interreligious and intercultural realities in those various contexts, we became aware of the fact that we had to change the position of the SIT journal in connection with the organization. The journal was not online at the time, and – as Terry already discussed—new challenges were arising regarding open access policies and the unfulfilled need to connect with the rest of the world. The reality in Europe (and I think it was the same in America) was that a lot of international students would come from Africa and Asia to get their Masters and PhD from European universities, and then go home and stay in touch with their doctoral supervisors as they proceeded to develop research agendas and new research methods commensurate to their own contexts. A remarkable, refreshing intercultural exchange was possible, but we were not living up to that possibility. These scholars (and specifically, where

we are concerned, these scholars dealing with interreligious studies and intercultural theology) needed a platform, but *SID* became more and more difficult to access because it was (and still is) only in print and very expensive, especially for international colleagues. So this led to an honest reckoning with how we could more effectively and ethically include our colleagues based in Africa and Asia. How could we highlight the issues that they were facing in their environment and draw on the insights that we as Europeans were too easily overlooking in their academic work—even though we were often the ones responsible for training these scholars.

And so, we started to look for another publisher, and *Equinox* was willing to take it on and share with *ESITIS* the responsibility for the journal. This was important to us, because one of our goals was to connect the European academy not just with Africa and Asia, but also with the Americas – as someone who is from Europe, but lives and teaches in the United States, it is especially clear to me that the discussions in these settings are very different in some ways, even as they overlap in others (for instance, in engaging with the interreligious dynamics of racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and so forth). In Europe, of course, we have many different countries facing different challenges, and this diversity is a strength for the journal and its surveyance of the field. I have come to realize that a lot of the discussions in the US context are very different from analogous discussions in Europe – as is quite apparent when surveying the programming at the American Academy of Religion; I was part of the AAR committee that approved the fairly new unit for Interreligious and Interfaith Studies, and the panels that have been hosted under that unit have made this reality quite clear. Not only the contents of the discussions are different, even when dealing with overlapping questions; even the topics themselves, the way the questions are framed, are often quite different as well. This is why we decided to launch a new journal and try to connect the different parts of the world, providing space for people to encounter the ways that analogous questions are being posed and addressed by others, in different ways.

Coming back to *ESITIS*, the society which sponsors the journal, I want to note that this society has always been focused not only on interreligious work but on productive interdisciplinary engagement as well, and I think this is significant in terms of our roundtable. Interreligious studies needs not only theology and religious studies, but also anthropology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, and so forth, and this was one of the goals of *ESITIS* from the beginning. This was not just for the sake of theoretical richness but also from a practical point of view: we looked for conversation partners in many different fields, and not only in the academy but in all kinds of social positions, for instance, people who are pastors or other kinds of community leaders, or more generally, interfaith practitioners. We have tried to cultivate a conversation that is attractive not just to academics but also to the larger public, insofar as the interreligious questions we are raising are of urgent importance in many sectors. Such an interdisciplinary and even inter-institutional approach can risk feeling like participants are losing something of their distinct professional identity, but on the other hand, there is something fresh and daring about attempting to keep these connections alive by way of the journal and in conferences every other year.

Our focus at each conference, which also feeds into the journal, is usually quite timely – the most recent, held in Sarajevo in 2019, was connected with the local discussions there on decoloniality and transitional justice, tracing back to the civil war. For our next conference, planned for 2021, we have been considering the topic of “sacred protest: religion, power, and resistance in an era of populism.” Basically, what we are trying to do with these gatherings is to

inspire research about the shared theme, and to cross-fertilize the many different contexts in which people are thinking and working by exposure to one another's approaches.

I will conclude by returning to one of the questions with which we prepared for this roundtable: what are some of the greatest *challenges* to the work of the journal as it surveys and helps to shape the field? Maybe because I am the only woman in this group, I see this with particular clarity: one of our challenges is to cultivate enough work dealing seriously with gender as an interreligious consideration. Many of the materials associated with interfaith dialogue remain very binary, and more often than not they represent a male-to-male platform of engagement. Questions arise as to what is being left out of the conversation, and so then also, out of the second-order analysis of such forms of engagement. And if we go further and think about different forms of sexuality and the role of religious understanding in how societies are dealing with the transgender activism that has intensified in recent years, we find that there is still very much we are not engaging with adequately. Sometimes we have to try simply to find individuals who are willing to write on such things, and preferably to help create a circle of people writing on new issues who can build on one another's insights and engender a livelier, more widespread conversation.

Another major challenge relates to the conferences, and recalls something that Terry brought up, namely, disproportionate resources when it comes to our attempt to create a truly international intellectual community. ESITIS is basically run by the work of volunteers, and there has never been much money involved—it really is just a group of engaged scholars who are committed to meeting with each other and learning from one another. But that means that there are very few resources for assisting participants without institutional support to travel, or for assisting those who might want to attend but would need to travel a far greater distance at far greater cost—for instance from African contexts or indeed from the Americas. Staying in close contact with each other is very important, and our vision is to create a network that connects Europe with these many other contexts in the rest of the world, but the economic inequalities become front and center when we face the logistics. The journal can rectify some of this, as we are able to be deliberate about seeking out contributions from Africa, from Asia, and so forth, but the conferences are where much of the conversation is driven forward. Perhaps the successes of holding conferences online, as we have had to do this past year, will result in new models for engaging more equitably worldwide.

A last major challenge to mention is the challenge of selecting the topics that matter, topics that people are really concerned with (and not just in our university departments). Of course, there are so many topics that matter, and it is a huge responsibility for a journal to make the decision to feature some and not others. We are always trying to discern what discussions will actually be usable in our readers' teaching, in their work environments, and in their interfaith practices. To the extent that our journals intend to make a difference, we have to keep in mind that the conversation we are trying to host and shape does not take place in a vacuum.

Aaron Hollander: With these rich histories in view, we can turn to some of the issues that connect the different journals and their respective agendas. One such theme, of course, is the challenges faced by our journals at the present moment—including the pragmatic challenges of readership and accessibility (especially international accessibility given changing demographics

and patterns of authority) but also including what we have identified as the overwhelmingly male, and overwhelmingly white, leadership of the field: what insights are going unnoticed, or remaining marginalized, in such an intellectual environment?

The other issue I would highlight is that of the moral horizons of ecumenical and interreligious studies, and the question of what role the journals claim for themselves in pursuing constructive purposes. In other words, if given the opportunity to conceive of ecumenical studies or interreligious studies more along the lines of political science (defined by its subject matter, irrespective of moral positioning), or on the other hand, more like peace and conflict studies (dedicated to a subject matter but organized and oriented by a moral commitment), it seems to me that all of us are saying that our journals fall closer to that latter conception of the field. In this case, can we get a little clearer on the contours of this moral alignment? Is there something we share in this regard, even recognizing that each journal may be primarily ecclesial in audience, primarily academic, or something in between?

Axel Takács: Taking up the question of pragmatic challenges first, I wonder which of our journals are open access and which are behind a paywall. It may be useful just to get a sense of the different configurations here. For our part, JIRS is open-access. There was a period, about a year or two ago, when we were considering whether we should change this, and most of us were pretty adamant that we need to remain open-access. We use the online PKP journal platform, which does its own Google Scholar and internet metadata indexing, so we are able to learn a lot from the wider reach of the journal; but also, as soon as you put in a paywall, it narrows the audience, and we wanted to be accessible to people who are not affiliated with an academic institution—interfaith organizers and such. So we remain open-access as a matter of principle; but again, our structure is to be jointly sponsored by Boston University School of Theology, Hebrew College, and Hartford Seminary. All these institutions contribute to financing the operation. The financing is spread out, but the burden would otherwise be substantial.

Stephen G. Brown: We are a hybrid journal in this respect. We have some articles that are behind a paywall for subscribers, and others which are open access. Our publisher, Wiley, has got an increasing number of national agreements, for example, with Germany and the United Kingdom, so that if you are attached to a qualified institution in one of these countries then your articles can be open access. But these arrangements are neither widespread nor always consistent.

Nelly van Doorn-Harder: ISIT is not totally open access, there is a paywall, but it is a very weak paywall; basically, if you subscribe (and it is pretty inexpensive to do so), then you have access to all the issues and can download them all. We certainly are not trying to exclude anyone from reading the contents, but the paid subscription format is one of the conditions of our arrangement with the publishers, who are assuming many of the costs of publication.

Terry Rey: Our journal is not open-access; it generates profits annually, and those profits go to the institute that is connected to the journal, the Dialogue Institute. This raises a question that was more or less explicit in all of our presentations: what are the relationships between the journal itself and the donors, the institutions, the presses, and so forth, which sponsor it and keep the lights on? Under what circumstances might such arrangements infringe upon academic freedom? What are the consequences of a shortage of resources and the difficult decisions that

might need to be made to keep a journal operating—and how do these contingencies impact the shape of the field more broadly?

Aaron Hollander: *Ecumenical Trends* is not open-access like JIRS is; but, as with many aspects of our publication, we are in a hybrid position. There is a paywall for online access to the journal, and of course print subscriptions are paid (although there are always free samples available for anyone who visits us). However, the cost of online access is very low, and it includes the ability to download past issues as well. The operation of the journal is not a for-profit enterprise, and so while we need subscriptions to keep the issues coming out, there is no red tape whatsoever around sharing the journal, online or otherwise. If a student is looking for a particular article and their library does not have the journal, we will happily send them an issue in the mail. We encourage authors who publish in *Trends* to share their article broadly, to post it on their personal websites, to disseminate it however they see fit. That is a breath of fresh air, I must say, for authors who are used to receiving strongly worded, threatening letters about not posting their own published work for others to read.

Stephen G. Brown: I see three main challenges, at least with regard to the current situation of *The Ecumenical Review*, but these clearly overlap in some ways with what the other journals are facing. One is the question of identity: what does it mean for a journal to have an “ecumenical” identity, whether the journal in question is associated with a specific religious community (like *Ecumenical Trends*) or with a secular university (like the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*). Aaron and Terry, is “ecumenical” still the right term to use for the work that your journals are stewarding, particularly in light of the broadening of focus that you both described?

The second issue is not only a question for the journals we represent here, but also more broadly for the field: how do we interpret and respond to the hegemony of English in the academy? Of course there are many excellent journals in other languages too, but those in English have unquestionably wider and more diverse audiences, as English remains a *lingua franca* (so to speak) for the global academy. If we were to start publishing articles in French or German or Arabic, as Terry raised as a possibility, then on the one hand the accessibility of those articles will be very limited and they risk being overlooked. On the other hand, particularly with the academic journals that are expected to have demanding quality standards, then it is in effect an exclusionary approach to say that we publish only in English and then contributions have to meet a standard of fluency in English. I know that if I am writing an article in German or in French I can never get the nuances right. And the same often (not always, of course) goes for people for whom English is a second or third language and they are submitting to the English journals. What can we do to make sure that we are not missing out on important contributions?

And the third issue I see, which is in no way limited to our field: what does it now mean to be a journal in an online world? We have already begun discussing accessibility. With commercial publication, articles are often locked behind paywalls, to which open-access offers an alternative, but the costs here are often passed on to authors. Either way there is economic exclusion at work (when we think about who has access to these journals, particularly outside of the academy), and the ethics of all this continue to evolve. Moreover, the newer journals have emerged in this online environment and may be more dexterous in this regard, but the older ones are used to putting together carefully curated issues over a longer period of time, which would take a theme or an area of study and have a range of different authors addressing that

theme from their own perspectives. This curation provides added value, and the final product is a resource precisely *as* a whole issue. But now, it is much more common for people to find articles through search engines, and articles need to be retrievable individually, which is how they are increasingly used. What does that mean for our editorial enterprise, where we are used to (and reasonably committed to) the curation of thematic issues where each article adds value to each other article by its presence and juxtaposition? And when articles are most easily accessed online, in databases where they appear in response to search terms rather than in the course of reading an issue of a specific journal, what does this mean for the identity of a journal – does every article, now, need somehow to represent the values and orientation of the whole journal?

Nelly van Doorn-Harder: In terms of carefully curated and thematically integrated journal issues becoming less the order of the day, I would not say that we are suffering in this respect, because even if people are discovering a particular article by way of a search engine, once they click through they will arrive at the entire table of contents. I do this all the time: I might go looking for something in particular but then see that the whole issue has other discussions that relate to what I originally was looking for, which I might not have seen otherwise. It is like browsing in a library – you go looking for something and find much else of interest. So I think we should not despair of creating curated, thematic issues, even if people are finding individual articles differently than they once did.

As for the language issue that Stephen raises, one of the trends worldwide (and I could give specific examples from Indonesia, where I am most familiar with the local situation) seems to be that it is a requirement for tenure and promotion to write articles in English and place them in international journals. And there might be a scale of sorts, by which the relative weight of certain publications or even certain languages (usually English, French, and German) is determined. So what we do, when we get an article submission that is very interesting but the English proficiency is really unacceptable, is ask the author if they can find someone to help them clean up the English before resubmitting the article, and if not, then we try to find a volunteer who can help work with the author. This does not always work, and we know there are some important articles that fall through the cracks because of a language barrier. The goal here is to give authors a leg up when they need it, and not to prejudge the quality of the article on the basis of the language – even if ultimately the publication will require getting the language in order. But the reality is that many scholars worldwide do not have access to specific languages in which other authors may want to publish, but they do have access to English, and so in this sense (and I am speaking as a non-native English speaker myself) publishing in English enhances accessibility broadly even as it might create obstacles in specific cases.

Terry Rey: With regard to publishing non-English articles or gatekeeping out articles with insufficient English proficiency – the possibility does exist to provide quality translation services for international scholars, and this seems like the most equitable approach to making sure that such scholars’ work can be adequately featured, but of course this requires resources, time, and willpower on the part of sponsoring institutions, which have to make it a priority (over other possible uses of the time and money).

Stephen raises an excellent question about the limits of “ecumenical” as a descriptor for what we are doing in a journal that has evolved and broadened in its scope. I have thought a lot about this and have discussed it with my colleagues. When I introduced myself to our readership

as the new editor, I took inspiration from Len Swidler and did an etymological inquiry, taking up every single word in the title of the journal, including “of” and “the,” and I broke them down and put them back together to reflect on what the journal is and what it might be for. So in that light, I remain comfortable with “ecumenical”—thinking, as we have been doing in this conversation, about the all-inclusiveness of “one, inhabited world” and about the many layers of difference and division and relationality that constitute this world. However, not everyone is going to read the piece and agree with such an etymological approach, and the term “ecumenical” does have certain connotations that, quite frankly, alienates a number of my colleagues in my department. There are, unfortunately, only a few of my colleagues who are interested in collaborating with the journal or even refereeing articles for us; this is, I think, a telling situation.

And accessibility is also an issue that has been close to my heart for a long time—not only the accessibility of the journal itself, but also of the ideas presented within it, the discourse that we are engaged in cultivating and disseminating. When I was a student at Temple, Len Swidler had me reading Raimundo Panikkar’s *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. I found it to be an amazing book, beautiful and persuasive in its argument, but also highly inaccessible in terms of the language. And as I said during the seminar: this is really powerful, but it also drives me crazy, because who on earth who really needs the benefits of this kind of thinking is going to be able to understand it, let alone apply it in society? Well, that is exactly the point of the Dialogue Institute, to host the journal and take in the high-octane academic discourse, but also to break it down and convert it into more immediately accessible, practicable forms. They are an outreach organization in this respect: they do interfaith diversity training in corporations, and they bring young people together on inter-community field trips, and so forth. That is just one possible approach to the problem of accessibility, but it is reflected in the arrangement whereby the journal and the institute remain attached to this day.

Axel Takács: What is interesting for me about the international scope of all our journals is less the fact that that we receive articles where the English could be better, needs editing for native sense, and so forth. Rather, it is that sometimes we receive articles from different parts of the world where it can be difficult (for me) to separate whether I am reading it and giving an objective academic critique of the argument or whether I am just reacting to its claims on the basis of Western norms regarding what we expect an article to do. To some extent, it is reasonable to say that the journal is based here and so has to be accountable to an academic landscape that is contextualized by and depends on these norms; but on the other hand, the work itself is often really worthwhile and should be taken seriously in spite of its divergence from academic conventions.

For example, occasionally we receive articles about some interfaith work in a part of Africa or South Asia, describing the institutions dealing with some local issue and explaining how they are going about it. Surely there would be some in our audience who would value reading such a piece. But we have to consider whether there is an argument beyond explaining what is going on in that context. Or in other cases, there *is* an argument made, but the argument is that interreligious harmony and peace are possible in our time. That is fine for authors and audiences to believe and commit themselves to, but it is not an academic article – we just cannot take it in the journal! On the other hand, I want to be able to share the work that people are doing in these many different settings, to expand the horizons of what kinds of interfaith activity our readers

know about. So where do we draw the line as editors between expanding the authorship and holding to the standards of our institutional and academic contexts? I would try to separate out the hegemonic expectations I have been steeped in, with regard to what an article is supposed to be or to do, from what I think the actual contribution of an unconventional article might be.

I do think that, in responding to these challenges, the field of interreligious studies has a place in the secular academy, not least to trouble the waters a little with regard to these expectations. Our journal is making the case for this, but it has to be a delicate attempt, both to meet the standards of the academic guild, and at the same time to show that the perspectives of interfaith practitioners and those of non-religious professionals, scholars taking a scrupulously non-religious approach to religious phenomena, can be held together and speak to one another fruitfully. We are now trying to organize a conference on this—to look not only at the interreligious work happening in divinity schools and seminaries, and in secular religious studies departments, but also at why interreligious studies is beneficial for doctors, nurses, lawyers, business professionals, public policy professionals, and so forth.

This is a different issue, though, from the challenge that Aaron raised about making space for differing views on the nature and purpose of ecumenical or interreligious work, or for differing moral and political perspectives. I mean, if someone writes an article detailing something that is totally adverse to the moral principles of the journal, for instance, arguing some point of white supremacist rhetoric about Jews or Muslims, even if it seems well-organized and has plenty of academic documentation, we are not going to publish something like that. There has to be a span of what is appropriate or acceptable (what’s known as an Overton Window); the perspective that anything goes so long as it is couched in academic convention is, in effect, its own immoral choice.

Aaron Hollander: But that still concerns the outer limits of what the moral orientation of the journals and the field can tolerate. I still would like to dig into the positive moral commitments that shape what we are trying to do by way of these journals in the field, in our institutions, and in society.

Before we get there, let me also respond to Stephen’s questions as others have done, as I think these are important issues that have kept coming up in all our comments. First, on the question of access and accessibility: in spite of the flexibility we have around sharing articles through professional networks, *Trends* is still not nearly as accessible as we could be (in terms of people actually finding the journal in the first place), and this gets at Stephen’s question about the role of the journals in a fast-paced, sound-bit online culture. It is not just about the availability of print or digital issues, but also about the pace with which we are able to publish and react to the “trends” of the ecumenical/interreligious landscape, and about who sees it when we do so. Last year, we made the decision to transition from publishing *Trends* eleven times a year to publishing it six times a year, on a bimonthly schedule, and the rationale here was that it would allow us to be more strategic about issues, to think more in terms of thematic continuities, to invite people to read and reflect on new documents, to draw in a more deliberate way on research perspectives, and so forth. The bimonthly schedule has improved the overall quality of the journal, but it slows down the pace, and there is a consequence to that. When you think about the articles that blow up online and are shared widely—whether from *The Atlantic*, or *Rolling Stone*, or closer to our own

field, from *Commonweal* or *Christianity Today*—we are not able to do what they are doing: highly accessible, highly shareable, and near-immediate reaction to something happening in the world.

By contrast, it takes us at least two months to publish a reflection on a current event or development (except in cases where we have advance access to a new document, or something like this) —and this is on the quicker end of the spectrum in the journal world! There are pros and cons, of course—we stand by the merits of careful research and a pace of reflection that doesn't succumb to the contemporary sense that anything worth saying has to be said immediately or it falls out of the public interest. But on the other hand, is there more we should be doing to keep up with the pace of our world? There are a lot of possibilities, and the fact of the pandemic has certainly pushed us to think of new ways of stewarding the conversation.

On Stephen's other question, about the utility of "ecumenical" as a framing of what we're doing once we expand into interpreting inter-religious and extra-religious division and reconciliation: like Terry, I have spent a lot of time thinking about this and have written about it elsewhere. I do think that it is important to retain the term *ecumenical*. I absolutely recognize that it can be alienating in some corners of the academy, and I respect the reasons why it would be alienating, in light of the twenty-first-century backlash against the twentieth century's various ambitions to unification, globalism, and so forth. As Pope Francis so capably presents it in his new encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, such universalizing projects (including the ecumenical movement, as has had to be reckoned with over the past few decades) can covertly or overtly support the concentration of power among the wealthy and the increasing marginalization of the most vulnerable of history.

But at the same time, it is very important that these reasonable concerns with globalization and ideological totalism not lead us to throw out ecumenicity as if they were synonymous. So too, it is not productive to *replace* ecumenical studies with interreligious studies in the scholarly world. For people working in interreligious studies (and I count myself as one of them), it would be a grave error to say that ecumenical studies had its day, and now we need to move on and do something wholly new. This is because ecumenical studies and the ecumenical movement have resources and have worked through problems that interreligious studies, as an emerging discipline, is now wrestling with—especially insofar as interreligious studies has to be able to account productively with intra-religious division if its analyses are to be realistic.

I would argue, in fact, that a thoroughly twenty-first-century ecumenics, inclusive of and responsive to its ambiguous history, is possible and needed. We cannot just rely on sanitized neologisms that jettison every colonizing or totalizing vestige; we have to take responsibility for that history and continue to wrestle with it. I think that the etymological approach raised by Terry is promising, because "the ecumenical" includes attention to that common ground itself, that *oikoumenē*, or inhabited world or common dwelling that is shared and contested by all of us, which has always been thoroughly interreligious as well as trans-religious, indeed trans-human. *Oikoumenē* is the physical (that is, not just the cultural) space of our inhabitation and interdependence, however much we embrace or resist that interdependence. This kind of framing of ecumenics, attentive to all these successive layers of the relations between religious communities, offers us immediate access to an ecological line of inquiry relating to the environmental precarity and asymmetry that are entailed in our contemporary divisions. Interreligious studies can have this in hand as well, and indeed must have it in hand in order to

do justice to its subject matter, even as the newer field’s priorities are often different and the integrity between these different registers can be less of a core analytical commitment.

This was a long way of circling back around to the question of our moral priorities as a shifting field and as instruments of fertilizing and cultivating that field—because “ecumenical,” to me, suggests not only the classic orienting horizon of Christian unity, but also a disposition or underlying ethical alignment that I might describe as an antonym to sectarianism – that is, as a collaborative, rather than a competitive, mindset in negotiating religious (and other ideological and cultural) difference. Those of us working in ecumenical studies and interreligious studies—whether as disciplines in the academy, or in the ecumenical field and the interfaith movement, or simply in civil society and our efforts as a civilization to wrest some kind of common good from an intensifying culture of cruelty and self-interest—have not only an opportunity but an obligation to resist sectarian framings of morality (i.e. actions are acceptable when they benefit us, but not when they benefit them) and of reality (i.e. their experience of what is taking place is invalid because of who they are). We have to be an engine for generating alternatives to the sectarian social dynamics that are deepening not only in the United States but globally as well.

Nelly van Doorn-Harder: Whatever we call ourselves, the intersection between different fields is very difficult to prevent, as it is to draw firm lines between “inter” and “intra” religious, or between an etymological framing of “ecumenical” and a more historical framing that looks at what the prevailing patterns are, and so forth. As Axel pointed out, we all have to make judgements about how to draw those lines and what we will prioritize. We may take some articles and put them through the review process, and with others we may just send them on and say that it is not really our place to publish them. But in the end, the foundation of our journals is the *network*—both a network of organizations, of institutions that allow bring people together in various ways, and also a network of the people themselves, a community that grows and changes and wants to have discussions together about certain topics. Wherever that discussion leads, the community will naturally have a wide range of perspectives on the utility of “ecumenical” as a scholarly term, whether it is old-fashioned or not, what it includes and does not include, and so forth. But it is the community that the journals depend on and are talking to, and this is where the question of accessibility and the after-effects of colonialism comes up again, as we were discussing earlier. If the point of our journals is to serve and grow a community of conversation, then whom are we including and excluding, and why?

I should say, on the question of language and the dominance of English, that when ESITIS meets in different contexts every other year, we never meet in a country that *only* speaks English (since the very first meeting, which was in the UK). English is indeed a *lingua franca* for the Society’s members and for most of the papers that are given, but the meetings move around and enable different people to get involved and have their own language and culture front and center in the community’s conversation. And in this way the network expands; when it comes to the individual members, yes, there are many who do not speak English very well, but we are all part of the community nevertheless, and we are able to work though the language issues together. Of course, what is happening in person at the conferences is different than the difficult choices that have to be made for publishing articles, as we have discussed. When your journal is open-access (and I think this is actually an enviable position), you can broaden the linguistic scope more easily, without the risk of losing subscribers. There are blogs and podcasts that do so, offering

excellent content in multiple languages—and we are thinking about it as well. How do we expand the conversation without doing a disservice to those who are already part of it?

Axel Takács: I would say that, broadly speaking, the field of interreligious studies itself is marked by teaching practices that are aimed at helping students and scholars alike to understand how systems, structures, ideologies, and the like emerge and maintain inequitable power relationships. Interreligious studies helps us critically analyze these relationships as we apply that second-order analysis of first-order interfaith dynamics or dialogues—it helps us realize what is really at stake. For instance, where disagreements over public expressions of religious devotion are actually rooted in colonial legacies, racist attitudes and systems, or class conflicts, or the like. And I think that this kind of disentanglement offered by interreligious studies is helpful also in appreciating the moral commitments of our work—to try to make visible those invisible marks of the economic, cultural, political, and ideological powers that exert pressure on all forms of interreligious engagement, and to equip people to resist this pressure where it is hegemonic and not in the service of equitable human flourishing.

Aaron Hollander: And it is really refreshing to see interreligious studies lay its cards on the table in this respect, that is, being open and honest about its commitments and the positioning of its scholars (as ecumenical studies has long been able to do, rooted as it is in a confessional project; but again, this has been at the cost of its academic marginalization). Being quite so overt about the moral commitments that shape our methods and questions is a bugbear in the academy—yet interreligious studies, in my experience, has not imposed a rhetorical shibboleth of objectivity on its practitioners. In this and other ways, the newer framework is opening space for intellectual work apart from the stale binaries by which religious studies in particular has been constrained—interreligious studies shares this with ecumenics, which at its best has long occupied a productively uncomfortable space between theology/ecclesiology and the social scientific study of religion.

Terry Rey: On the big question of moral horizons, which is extremely important: I perceive the work that JES is doing (and also my own scholarship in the field) as aimed at redressing interreligious *misunderstandings*, which have been disastrous throughout history and of course continue to be so today in many parts of the world. As Stephen Prothero makes clear in his book *Religious Literacy*, religious *illiteracy* is not just ignorant, it can be extremely dangerous. My students appreciate this risk, and they respond well to the suggestion that religious literacy is everyone's responsibility. When I take them to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, we visit the Sabbath elevator, and the kosher pantry, and the gender-divided Islamic prayer rooms, and we meet with chaplains, and so forth. Students quickly see that whatever we can contribute to raising the level of interreligious literacy in our society will contribute, in whatever small way, to a more robust ethical culture.

Aaron Hollander: But part of the recognition that “religions” aren't unitary, isolated entities is that “religious literacy” has to mean something different than being able, say, to recite the three dominant Hindu traditions, and the fourfold way of Buddhism, and the five pillars of Islam. If religious literacy is not just to be a reinscription of the old world religions model—with all of its colonial baggage and insensitivity to the intra-religious divisions and intersectional dynamics that are definitive of what religion is and always has been—then it has to be *interreligious* literacy, capable of appreciating internal diversities, cross-fertilization between traditions over time, and

so forth. There again is your Max Mueller aphorism updated for our time: “the only religious literacy is interreligious literacy”!

Axel Takács: Right, and so much of this has to do with the funding of the humanities in our university system, and the neoliberal attitudes taken toward the role that the humanities play in our education. If a “world religions” class can satisfy a compartmentalized distribution requirement, without obligating anyone to learn new ways of doing things, then that is good enough in many institutional contexts. An “introduction to interreligious studies” might be more productive in terms of actually equipping students to perceive how different traditions and cultures continually feed off one another and reshape themselves in light of shared goals and divisive identity practices (and in the context of neocolonial and racial capitalist power dynamics), but it will not necessarily have the same kind of support from universities that are putting their institutional energy into “professionalizing” their students, reproducing the status quo, and staying afloat financially.

Nelly van Doorn-Harder: Our students need an interreligious consciousness no matter what they are doing (as I would hope would be clear to those responsible for professionalization metrics), but especially if they are studying religion or theology. If I am teaching Islam, of course, I cannot *just* teach Islam—I have to position its emergence in a certain environment and pose questions around its development in relation to Christianity, and so forth. The same is true, though much less appreciated, in confessional theological education. Think what it would mean for people training as religious leaders to be trained rigorously in the ways that their own traditions have been entangled with other traditions, have been given the shape that they have in no small part as the result of interactions with religious others. Whatever one happens to think of this (and it is doubtless a controversial prospect), these are the questions that the younger generation is posing, in the universities and the religious communities themselves, and it is our responsibility as journals to reflect and nourish that conversation.

Stephen G. Brown: This has been a fascinating conversation! Our journals are very different, yet it is so interesting to see the resonances between their histories and approaches.

Aaron Hollander: And those resonances and continuities are by no means exhausted. I trust that what we have produced here is only a foretaste of more substantial collaborations to come. Thank you all for your insights, for your participation in this roundtable, and for your leadership in our continually evolving field.



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