

The Journal of Interreligious Studies

Published by Hebrew College, Boston University School of Theology, & Hartford Seminary

Issue 32

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From the Editor-in-Chief

1

Axel Marc Oaks Takács

The “End of Dialogue” and Christian-Muslim Interrelations: Dialogue as Self-Perception Venue

5

Najib George Awad

The Interfaith Society: A Durkheimian Analysis of Interfaith Engagement

21

Jenn Lindsay

Early Encounters in Colonial Jamaica: Hindu and Rastafari Divine Metaphysics

40

Dominique Stewart

George Floyd and the “American Spring:” Secular Martyrs, Democratic Uprisings, and the Radical Religion of Trumpist Fascism

63

Ellen Amster

Challenging Women: Female Wisdom Figures and Spiritual Progress in *The Shepherd of Hermas* and Tibetan Buddhism

76

Thomas Cattoi & Jean-Francois Racine

Book Reviews

90

Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies, by Paul Hedges

Reviewed by Lucinda Mosher
& Axel Marc Oaks Takacs

The More Torah, The More Life: A Christian Commentary on Mishnah Avot, by Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski

Reviewed by Ophir Yarden

94

Under One Crown: A Renewed Look at Creation in Word and Image, by Raachel Nathan Jurovics, Sarah Stein, Mary Blocher, and illustrated by Andrea Gomez

The Name: A History of the Dual-Gendered Hebrew Name for God, by Mark Sameth

Reviewed by Chava Bahle

97

IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in our Digital Lives, by Chris Stedman

Reviewed by J. Cody Nielsen

101

Transcendence and Non-Naturalism in Early Chinese Thought, by Joshua R. Brown & Alexis McLeod

Reviewed by Bin Song

103

Theology Without Walls: The Trans-religious Imperative, edited by Jerry L. Martin

Reviewed by Bin Song

107

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We remain grateful to Dr. Stephanie Varnon-Hughes and Rabbi Joshua M. Z. Stanton for their vision and commitment to interreligious engagement by founding the Journal under its original title, the Journal of Interreligious Dialogue, in 2009.

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From the Editor-in-Chief

I am pleased to manage the editing and production of another publication of thought-provoking and illuminating articles and book reviews.

After more than a year of undergoing the stress and hardship of a pandemic, parts of the globe appear to be turning a corner thanks to the distribution of multiple vaccines. Nonetheless, we are now witnessing another permutation marking the inequities of racial capitalist and neocolonial structures: the Global North and predominantly White nations remain far ahead in distribution and reception of the vaccine compared to the Global South and predominantly non-White nations.¹ Within the United States, communities of color remain disproportionately under-vaccinated compared to their White co-residents.² This is the case despite the fact that those very communities—domestically and globally—who are under-vaccinated are also the most at risk from COVID-19 and disproportionately provide wealthier nations and people with extracted capital and cheap labor producing essential goods and providing essential services: this is racial capitalism functioning optimally, sadly.³

Additionally, I bring your attention to the rise of anti-Asian racism in the United States, which is due largely in part to the political and popular discourse of making COVID-19 a racialized phenomenon. Anti-Asian racism is nothing new to the United States; the nation has a rich legal history of excluding people of Asian descent from immigration, naturalization, civil rights, and citizenship.⁴ Given the recent murders of women of Asian descent in the shootings at Atlanta-area massage parlors, organizing, researching, and educating against anti-Asian racism and violence is a necessity.⁵ There is much work to be done in connecting anti-Asian racism and violence to the twin themes of White and Christian supremacy, themselves permutations of the Orientalism that shapes discourse on religion and race as well as the popular consumption thereof. For data, analysis, and research on anti-Asian racism and violence, as well as for a list of resources and action items to organize against it, I urge our readers to read a note written by Mia Charlene White (linked in footnote).⁶ Dr. White is an Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at The New School and organizes with SOMAJustice in Northern NJ, where I, too, reside. I am grateful to her for sharing her note with us.

It is with this in mind that we must continue to advocate with critical scholarship and engaged pedagogies. I hope that the journal can remain a venue for publishing articles on these

¹ See the COVID-19 Data Explorer at <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>.

² See Amy Schoenfeld Walker, Anjali Singhvi, Josh Holder, Robert Gebeloff and Yuriria AvilaMarch, “Pandemic’s Racial Disparities Persist in Vaccine Rollout,” in *The New York Times* (March 5, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/03/05/us/vaccine-racial-disparities.html>

³ For a recent review of literature and critical analysis of racial capitalism and the inequities and injustices it perpetuates, see Charisse Burden-Stelly, “Modern U.S. Racial Capitalism: Some Theoretical Insights,” in *Monthly Review* (July 1, 2020), <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/07/01/modern-u-s-racial-capitalism/>

⁴ For an excellent presentation of this immigration history, see Chapter 3 (“Immigration, Citizenship, and White Christian Supremacy”) of Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

⁵ See Kate Brumback and Angie Wang, “Man charged with killing 8 people at Georgia massage parlors,” AP News (March 18, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/georgia-massage-parlor-shootings-leave-8-dead-f3841a8e0215d3ab3d1f23d489b7af81>

⁶ See <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HalL1Z0qCL07q1rVxvs3RnV43WRFjDUx1P33isW12Nk/>

issues of inequities and injustices and from the perspective of interfaith, interreligious, and religious studies.

Events and Updates

The *Journal of Interreligious Studies* is excited to partner with the Association of Interreligious/Interfaith Studies in organizing a symposium on interreligious education at the high school and undergraduate level. The program seeks to connect the experiences and gaps that exist within and between these two educational levels. The symposium is scheduled for **April 9, 12:00 – 4:00 p.m. EST**. It will include two panels, one composed of educators and scholars focusing on the high school level and one on the undergraduate level. There will be breakout rooms for conversation and time for Q&A. It will end with a keynote address. I will send out an announcement via our website with more details later; for now, please mark your calendars!

The second episode of *Inter/Sections*, a podcast in partnership with Seton Hall’s Institute for Communication and Religion, will be released before the end of the spring semester. It is an interview of, and conversation between, Celene Ibrahim, Ph.D., and Irvin Scott, Ed.D., on the topic of interreligious and interfaith studies and engagement at the high school level—from faith-based partnerships with public schools to education and curriculum. Stay tuned!

Finally, the Boston University School of Theology and the Tom Porter Program on Religion and Conflict Transformation are hosting a three-part workshop: “Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, White Supremacy, and U.S. Culture: The Call for Interfaith ‘Upstanding.’” It takes place on **April 2, 8, and 9 at 9:00 a.m. EST**. Details and registration may be found in the link footnoted below.⁷

In This Issue

This issue comprises five articles: four are part of our regular rolling submissions and one is in response to our Interreligious Studies and Politics CFP. The editorial and publishing teams are once again pleased to share such pertinent and thought-provoking material with our readership.

The first article, “The ‘End of Dialogue’ and Christian-Muslim Interrelations: Dialogue as Self-Perception Venue,” by Najib George Awad, responds to two skeptics of interreligious dialogue, one Christian the other Muslim: John Millbank and Ḥasan al-Bannā, respectively. Taking seriously their critiques—not yet common enough, though certainly worthy of attention—permits us to reexamine the purpose of interreligious dialogue. Awad suggests that the goal of interreligious dialogue may be just as much about evaluating self-perception and identity formation as it is about rethinking the perception of the other. In my reading of it, I am left with two questions: whom does interreligious dialogue serve, the self or the other? And if the self, what are we to make when social structures of power (racial, neocolonial, religious, etc.) implicitly subjugate one party to the other (despite best *personal* intentions)?

Jenn Lindsay, in “The Interfaith Society: A Durkheimian Analysis of Interfaith Engagement,” offers another examination of the nature and goal of interreligious dialogue, but

⁷ <https://bostonu.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJEtcumhqDsoHtXk82zo8aDKtSNcWrV6dQkY>

this time from a sociological perspective. Drawing on ethnographic data on interfaith engagement in Rome, Italy, Lindsay suggests that interfaith work is less about changemaking, social transformation, conflict reduction, and other concrete results, and more a site for the formation of a multi-religious moral community. Lindsay offers data and analysis to suggest that interfaith communities and their activities are, perhaps, their own religions (as defined by Durkheim). While Lindsay does not suggest as much, I can see that for many of our readers this article is certainly an implicit challenge to the interfaith movement globally: how can real dialogue occur across not just lines of difference, but walls of separation?

In “Early Encounters in Colonial Jamaica: Hindu and Rastafari Divine Metaphysics,” Dominique Stewart offers an illuminating essay on interreligious and intercultural transformation among residents of colonial Jamaica. Stewart challenges the Afrocentric understanding of Rastafari’s history by excavating some of the interreligious encounters, as well as concealed metaphysical intimacies, between Hindu indentures (and their descendants) and the Afro-Jamaican “Christian” lower class in colonial Jamaica. This is a fascinating example of interreligious studies in historical context and a case study for the permeable and porous boundaries that separate religious traditions across all contexts.

Ellen Amster, in “George Floyd and the “American Spring:” Secular Martyrs, Democratic Uprisings, and the Radical Religion of Trumpist Fascism,” proposes a provocative comparison between the “American Spring” of 2020, sparked by the murder of George Floyd under the knee of a paramilitary police officer, and the Arab Spring of 2011, triggered by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi (Tunisia), the beating and murder of Khalid Said at the hands of police (Egypt), and the abduction, torture, and murder of Hamza al-Khatib by security forces (Syria). Amster underscores the political hagiographies of these secular martyrs to demonstrate the religious and corporeal nature of politics itself. The essay will certainly demand critical and constructive responses to the limits of this comparison. However, in my reading, Amster clearly demonstrates the necessity for applying the theories and methods of religious studies—and interreligious studies—to our contemporary global, political situation that is constituted by the rise of religious nationalism, fascism, authoritarianism, conspiracy theories, and fundamentalisms of all sorts.

The final article of this issue is written by Thomas Cattoi & Jean-Francois Racine. In “Challenging Women: Female Wisdom Figures and Spiritual Progress in *The Shepherd of Hermas* and Tibetan Buddhism,” they explore the role of female figures in two different traditions. These gendered interactions that are found in various Christian and Buddhist textual traditions are examined comparatively. It is perhaps unsurprising that these traditions employ the “subversive power of female sexuality” but always in the context of an “enduring affirmation of patriarchal normativity.” This essay demands a whole discipline of feminist interreligious readings of these pre-modern sources, lest all female figures be reduced to what popular culture has termed the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl:” a female character whose role is reduced to teach “young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.”⁸

⁸ See Nathan Rabin, “My Year Of Flops, Case File 1: Elizabethtown: The Bataan Death March of Whimsy,” *The A. V. Club* (January 25, 2007), <https://film.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595>.

The issue closes with seven book reviews.

- *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*, by Paul Hedges; reviewed by Axel Takacs & Lucinda Mosher.
- *The More Torah, The More Life: A Christian Commentary on Mishnah Avot*, by Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski; reviewed by Ophir Yarden
- *Under One Crown: A Renewed Look at Creation in Word and Image*, by Raachel Nathan Jurovics, Sarah Stein, Mary Blocher, and illustrated by Andrea Gomez and *The Name: A History of the Dual-Gendered Hebrew Name for God*, by Mark Sameth; reviewed by Chava Bahle
- *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in our Digital Lives*, by Chris Stedman; reviewed by J. Cody Nielsen
- *Transcendence and Non-Naturalism in Early Chinese Thought*, by Joshua R. Brown & Alexis McLeod; reviewed by Bin Song
- *Theology Without Walls: The Trans-religious Imperative*, edited by Jerry L. Martin; reviewed by Bin Song

Gratitude

This issue would not have come together without the exceptional work of Lucinda Mosher (Senior Editor) and Taylor Thomas (Research Fellow).

Thank you for your continued support and interest in the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*. Enjoy this issue!

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