

# A Contrapuntal Discipline: Through the Landscape of “Inter-” and “Religious”



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## Abstract

This essay is offered as an encouragement to continue paying attention to how we do interreligious studies. That is why I pay attention to how my colleagues explain it. I note a proliferation of landscape metaphors that seem oblivious to how landscapes are representations of the power relations that govern societies. What do these metaphors say, I wonder, about some of our conceptual grammar, some of the instincts that subtend and suffuse this discipline? Here, I use “discipline” as practice. My suggestion is for us to stay attuned to relations, the “inter-” in interreligious studies, while appreciating possible dynamics signaled by “-religious.” An emphasis on hearing multiple, often contrapuntally “flowing currents”—concurrent with a refusal to reflexively prioritize one of those clusters of notes—might be of help to those working across the spectrum of interreligious studies. My use of “contrapuntal” relies on Edward Said’s simile of counterpoint, music’s “capacity for plurality of voices.” I stress, through the epigraph, the final note in Said’s last masterpiece, his *Out of Place*. Freed from the task of speaking from within an academic enclosure, or belonging to a particular vision of humanism, he invigorates his sonic expression by motioning toward clusters and currents that are independent yet somehow related contrapuntally.

## Keywords

Interreligious studies, interreligious relations, Edward Said, power, theory, method, category, religion, ethnography

## Preface

This essay first appeared as the closing chapter of *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies* (2022), edited by Lucinda Mosher; it is reprinted here with the kind permission of Georgetown University Press. Drs. Yuskaev and Mosher have been colleagues for a quarter-century, having worked together in three institutions in two states (St Francis College in Brooklyn, NY, The Interfaith Center of New York, and Hartford Seminary—now Hartford International University for Religion and Peace. Their worldviews and training as scholars differ sharply. They are well practiced at sparring respectfully—and at woodshedding major scholarly projects collegially. As

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*The Georgetown Companion* was nearing completion, Lucinda came to Timur with a proposal that he compose its closing chapter. She issued a two-pronged directive: that the resulting essay interrogate the field of interreligious studies generally, and that it be in conversation with her ideas as expressed in that volume’s Preface and Chapter One specifically. He agreed immediately and with much enthusiasm. Dr. Yuskaev’s use of the counterpoint simile winks at Dr. Mosher’s parallel career as a musician. It also nods at the process by which this essay took shape—a process that included a series of lengthy phone conversations, several revisions of this essay, and a redrafting of the volume’s Preface and Chapter One. Truly, as a process, it was dialogical, rigorous, and fun! It continues. Both scholars see this essay as a seedbed for another project of their own.



I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents..., at their best,...require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are “off” and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme.

—Edward Said, *Out of Place*

I do not remember the date (it was in the early 2000s), but I do remember the discomfort. It encroached a couple of hours into a day-long seminar, Native Americans of New York, part of a semi-annual series of events, Religions of New York, organized by The Interfaith Center of New York. At the time, as a side job, I taught an Introduction to World Religions course at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, New York. With a notepad and a pen, I sat in the back row, recording material I might share with my students—while also observing the audience of some one hundred “religious community leaders,” as The Interfaith Center’s staff would call them. Panel after panel, my Native American neighbors, representing at least a dozen community-based organizations, spoke about their work. But they appeared to say nothing, I was beginning to worry, about their religions—at least not what I thought I needed for my course, nothing textbook, nothing that I somehow expected to acquire. At some point, an audience member asked a question that echoed how I felt. I think he said something like, *Thank you! We are very grateful and this has been incredibly helpful, but can we also learn about your religions?* I remember the answer from one of the panelists. I think it was George Stonefish, who often introduces himself in public events, when speaking “as an Indian,” as “a Delaware, on my mother’s side, from the Moravian Indian Reserve-on-the-Thames in southern Ontario, and on my father’s side, a Chippewa from the St. Isabella/St. Rosa reservation in Michigan...and raised on the Upper Eastside of Manhattan.”<sup>1</sup> If it was him, I think I remember him responding to the query with his

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\* Many thanks to Abbas Barzegar and Matt Weiner for the conversations that shaped much of this essay.

signature wry smile: *We don't want you to know us. We want you to respect us.* Several other panelists—those facing the audience and those seated among us, because they had already spoken or were to speak next—rose up to echo Stonefish. Respect, they stressed, is *the point*. It is not an outcome. It is a pre-condition.

There was an irony in my discomfort. The seminar, including its participants' contrapuntal refusal to foreground "religion," was flowing in the agreed upon direction. Coordinating the Religions of New York series was part of my full-time job as an Interfaith Center staffer. Along with two other staff members, Matt Weiner and Henry Young, I had spent many months deepening our existing relationships, developed through numerous other programs, with our colleagues from the city's Native American organizations. Many of them had already discussed with us the problematic dynamics of framing their lives and work in imposed categories, be it "religion" or "culture." Some of them did it through jokes and side comments, counterpoints they inserted in our interactions. (Only later would I come to appreciate that, as in music, counterpoints in a conversation are vital.) In part, I did not really hear their comments because my ear was attuned differently, because, perhaps paradoxically to some, "religion" was not central to Religions of New York. We used that word strategically, as a way to broaden networks of support among human beings and organizations that typically, but not exclusively, identified themselves, for many sound reasons, as religious. In retrospect, strategic communication was present throughout our work. At every such workshop, many people from many communities practiced what Audra Simpson might call a "calculus of ethnography"—"of what you need to know and what I refuse to write in"<sup>2</sup>—a notion resonant with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "strategic essentialism."<sup>3</sup> So why the discomfort during this particular seminar? In part, I think, I tuned myself differently on that particular day. On that occasion, I geared myself up to be what some might call "a scholar of religion."

I will return to this story later in this [essay]. For now, let me say that I remembered that experience in the fall of 2020, as I was teaching—via Zoom, due to the pandemic—my Muslims in Europe and North America course at Hartford Seminary. My students were discussing Sylvester A. Johnson's *African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom*. And even though the theme of "the racialization of Islam" in the United States and other settings had been consistent in our conversations and readings—and although my students have been experiencing such dynamics and could analyze them with exemplary insight—they and I had to spend quite some time thinking through the implications of Johnson's challenge.<sup>4</sup> It has to do with "what race is and what it does"—"a state practice of ruling people within a political order that perpetually places some within and others outside of the political community."<sup>5</sup> When religious identification is employed in this process, Johnson argues, "religion can in fact be a race."<sup>6</sup> If that is the case, Johnson requests, then it is with "urgency that scholars must be able to

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<sup>1</sup> George Stonefish, "What is an Indian?" *Amerinda Inc.*, <http://amerinda.org/newsletter/0200/pov.html> (accessed November 30, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship." *Junctures*, 9 (2007): 72.

<sup>3</sup> Mridula Nath Chakraborty, "Everybody's Afraid of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Reading Interviews with the Public Intellectual and Postcolonial Critic," *Signs*, 35, no. 3 (2010): 621–45.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvester A. Johnson's *African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 377.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, 319 and 394.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, 393.

conceive of race without the somatic body, or religion without creed.”<sup>7</sup> “But what about theology?” one student, a Muslim chaplain, asked, concerned that Johnson is neglecting something key.<sup>8</sup> Our subsequent discussion entailed a reminder about something not difficult, which the chaplain and my other students certainly knew: no single variable explains human realities; an emphasis does not imply a neglect of other emphases. Of course, the discipline, the practice this reminder connotes, is not easy at all.

What is promising about interreligious studies? Looking over [the *Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*], it might be that it denotes a practice of engaging with—studying and being attuned to—human relations as multidimensional realities. Therefore, I hope, it is not surprising that I have opened this piece with two recollections of multidimensional relations. The epigraph is also an opening—hinting, I hope, at a key promise of interreligious studies, and at how nuanced and arduous this discipline is.

I offer this contribution as an encouragement to continue paying attention to how we do interreligious studies. That is why I pay attention to how my colleagues explain it. I note, for instance, a proliferation of landscape metaphors that seem oblivious to how landscapes, in the words of Gary Fields, “are representations of the societies anchored to them and the relations of power that govern them.”<sup>9</sup> What do these metaphors say, I wonder, about some of our conceptual grammar, some of the instincts that subtend and suffuse this discipline? To be clear, it is not my intention to become involved in the discussion on whether interreligious studies is a field, subfield, discipline, subdiscipline, or any other institutional set-up. Here, I use “discipline” in another sense, as practice. My suggestion is for us to stay attuned to relations, the “inter-” in interreligious studies, while appreciating possible dynamics signaled by “-religious.” An emphasis on hearing multiple, often contrapuntally “flowing currents”—concurrent with a refusal to reflexively prioritize one of those clusters of notes—might be of help to those working across the spectrum of interreligious studies.

My use of “contrapuntal” relies on Edward Said’s simile of counterpoint, music’s “capacity for plurality of voices.”<sup>10</sup> But it comes with a warning—to stay attuned to the sound quality of Said’s expression. Aware of David Bartine’s observation about Said’s own “tendency toward visual over sonic consideration of counterpoint,” I stress, through the epigraph, the final note in Said’s last masterpiece, his *Out of Place*.<sup>11</sup> This is where, I think, Said’s articulation of counterpoint is “at [its] best.” Freed from the task of speaking from within an academic enclosure, or belonging to a particular vision of humanism, he invigorates his sonic expression by motioning toward “clusters” of contrapuntally flowing “currents,” independent yet somehow related, “moving about, not necessarily forward...without one central theme.”

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 400.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous, quoted with permission. (I am grateful to my class and the colleague I quoted for their contribution to this article and permission to use this example.)

<sup>9</sup> Gary Fields, “Landscaping Palestine: Reflections of Enclosure in a Historical Mirror,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42, no. 1 (2010): 64.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), xxxii, as quoted in David Bartine, “The Contrapuntal Humanisms of Edward Said,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 17, No. 1 (2015): 59.

<sup>11</sup> Bartine, “The Contrapuntal Humanisms,” 63.

Based on this, for example, I am wary about the common use in [the *Georgetown Companion*] of “inter-” as immediately signifying the spatial “between.” Neither am I at peace with “inter-” standing for a “border, edge and margin”—peculiar how spatial metaphors are prone to produce hierarchies. My counterpoint is not about our words, but what might be an inherited conceptual grammar, a peculiar syntax, of engaging with human realities as though they are lands to be discovered, navigated, staked out and mapped—with what we know, or should know, comes along.<sup>12</sup> Three definitions of interreligious studies mentioned in this companion’s opening chapter foreground the word “field” explicitly. What is behind this rush to claim and institutionalize a terrain? What tendencies are at play in the subtitles of the two major volumes preceding this compilation, *Defining a New Field* and *Dispatches from an Emerging Field*?<sup>13</sup> Are not dispatches—like the contemporary *New York Times* tales of real estate discoveries in Harlem or Maugham’s classic *Gentleman In The Parlour*—a colonial genre?<sup>14</sup>

Far from being unique, my questions echo, for instance, Brian Pennington’s emphasis on the “critique of pluralism’s episteme.” My stress on practice resonates with his presentation of interreligious studies as “a mode of action” and “a mode of inquiry.” His articulation of “the attention to the between” as “the paramount activity” of those engaging in interreligious studies is likewise nuanced.<sup>15</sup> I note, however, that *mode* and *activity* appear some one thousand words into his piece, preceded and otherwise enclosed by dozens of *fields*. I highlight this with appreciation, because modern practices and related to them conceptual grammars of mapping and enclosing terrain are exceedingly difficult to counteract. The visual impressions permeating our spatial metaphors come from the spaces we inhabit, inherit, and perpetuate. Such spaces, including fields, tend to appear and be administered as “allotments,” “largely rectilinear blocks,” landscapes of “geometrically regular form.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, through all the “fields,” Pennington’s emphases on “the attention to the between” and “activity” appear, to my ear, as contrapuntal notes. They break through the settled monotony of “geometrically regular” words.

Much of the work in interreligious studies embodies such contrapuntal movements, difficult as they are to actuate and carry. One can sense this dynamic in Paul Hedges’s one-sentence explanation of interreligious studies: it is, he writes, “a diverse rather than a strictly limited field; indeed...it is a meeting point of a set of interests.”<sup>17</sup> What happens after the semicolon, “the meeting point of...interests,” is a counterpoint, coming, unsurprisingly, after the reflexive “field.” In [the *Georgetown Companion*], counterpoints are voiced by numerous

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<sup>12</sup> Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, Noah J. Silverman, eds. *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2018) and Hans Gustafson, *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020). I am fascinated by the cover image of Gustafson’s volume. Is it a cross-like opening to the heavens, between two skyscrapers, that frames “Interreligious Studies?” What might it communicate about this discipline? The cover of Patel, Peace and Silverman’s volume is equally reliant on geometrically regular forms.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Johnson, “When NYT Real Estate Stories Read Like 19th Century Colonial Dispatches,” May 2, 2016, *FAIR*, <https://fair.org/home/when-nyt-real-estate-stories-read-like-19th-century-colonial-dispatches/>.

<sup>15</sup> Brian K. Pennington, “The Interreligious Studies Agenda: Three Dilemmas,” in *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, ed. Lucinda Mosher (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 15-23.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Fields, *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 79.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Hedges, “Editorial Introduction: Interreligious Studies,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, 27, no. 2 (2014):128.



contributors who stress approaches and engagement. Singh’s “aesthetics” and “ligament,” for example—or Minister’s “ecology,” or Hickey and Buc’s “caregiving...experiment,” or Gustafson’s “spider-silk,” a metaphor attuned to relations and embracing “volatility, randomness, disorder”—are interventions into how interreligious studies is practiced.<sup>18</sup> Such agonistic and creatively contrapuntal notes appear to be characteristic to this discipline. To me, that is promising.

But hope alone is not enough. Consider, for example, the case of Oddbjørn Leirvik’s stress on a “relational approach.” As an insight, it is a consummate counterpoint. Yet, how well does this note carry? Leirvik opens his *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach*, on page 1, with a warning, a framing of sorts, that “religion is a chronically unstable category.” I appreciate “chronically” and “unstable,” but why must one cling to religion as a category? And, no, the transformation of this category, on page 2, into “the phenomenon of religion” does not help. And neither does “the modern phenomenon of dialogue between religions.” What pasts and presents and politics do these phrases conceal? It is quite ironic. The initial stress, the activation of Leirvik’s counterpoint, has to do with relations involving human beings. In his phrasing, however, pertinent to interreligious studies are relations “between religions,” with human beings fading behind the contours of a generalized “phenomenon.” To be fair, the strength of Leirvik’s counterpoint is in his case studies. That is where his key observation of “secularity as a common language” in the encounters he studies gains force.<sup>19</sup> It is promising in part because it might be a countermovement to, in Simpson’s words, “difference...as a unit of analysis,” a trouble constitutive to the category of religion.<sup>20</sup> To appreciate Leirvik’s counterpoint, however, one has to hear it against the grain of his own framing and phrasing. It seems there are too many snares in *inter-* and *-religious* to carry on unaware.<sup>21</sup> To explain what I mean, it is time to turn to this [essay’s] first story.

What was at play in the refusal by many participants of *Native Americans of New York* to foreground religion in our conversation? With many human beings and myriad realities and relations involved, I will not pretend that I can answer this question descriptively (I refuse to write dispatches). What matters for this piece is that that dynamic was—somehow, not in a geometrically regular form—not unlike the practice Simpson participated in and developed into a methodology during her ethnographic work among her people, the Mohawks of Kahnawake in Canada and the U.S. Simpson calls it a strategy of “ethnographic refusal,” which means that, for vital reasons, there are some questions a researcher must not ask because they know that the people they work with will refuse to answer them—and if a researcher somehow knows an

<sup>18</sup> See, all in *The Georgetown Companion*, Kevin Minister, “An Ecological Approach to Interreligious Studies: Seeing Religious Difference as Emerging in Place,” 157-167; Wakoh Shannon Hickey and Hannah Murphy Buc, “Contemplative Caregiving and a DeathFest: An Interdisciplinary Interreligious Experiment,” 430-440; Nikky-Guninder K. Singh, “Turning to Aesthetics: The Guru Granth Sahib and Interreligious Studies,” 317-325; Hans Gustafson, “Sparring with Spider Silk: Models for the Relationship between Interreligious Studies and the Interfaith Movement,” 32-40.

<sup>19</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1, 2, 37, and 41.

<sup>20</sup> Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal,” 68.

<sup>21</sup> For an exceptional analysis on a related cluster of dynamics, see Andrea Smith, “Native Studies at the Horizon of Death: Theorizing Ethnographic Entrapment and Settler Self-Reflexivity,” in *Theorizing Native Studies*, ed. Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, 207-34 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

answer, they must refuse to communicate it.<sup>22</sup> In Simpson's case, this practice has to do with sovereignty—sovereignty of land, without a doubt, but also intellectual sovereignty, “when access to information, to knowledge, to the intellectual commons is controlled by the people who generate that information.”<sup>23</sup> It also means, crucially, a sovereignty of interpretation and framing. In other words, during the Native Americans of New York seminar, many surface appearances to the contrary, I, as its official organizer, was really not in control of its framing, somehow related to the category or “phenomenon” of religion. Such power dynamics, Simpson observes, “makes some liberal thinkers uncomfortable.”<sup>24</sup>

The instinct is to get closer to a categorical truth. A stress on relations, however, runs counter to that instinct. It emphasizes respect as a precondition. The counterpoint I heard on that day is resonant with William Connolly's notion of “agonistic respect.” It is “a kissing cousin of liberal tolerance.” The distinction has to do with power and, to use Simpson's word, sovereignty; it entails, as Connolly puts it, an ongoing practice of refusing an arrangement where “tolerance is bestowed upon private minorities by a putative majority.” Crucially, Connolly adds (and that is where sovereignty is key), the “respect side of the relationship comes from different sources for different constituencies. The respect between them is deep precisely to the extent that each can respect the other in drawing its respect from a source unfamiliar to it.”<sup>25</sup> That is why broad stoke categorizations—equipped with “religion” and other landscaping tools—are so precarious. They jeopardize relations. And, if one engages in interreligious studies in a “mode of inquiry,” they cover up the nuances in such relations. From this I take that key in interreligious studies is the question of how: How do we do it?

Let me bring up an example, two books roughly on the same subject. One of them, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, is by a founding father of interreligious studies, Eboo Patel. Another, *Young Muslim America: Faith, Community and Belonging*, is by Muna Ali, a scholar who writes from a different discipline. The framing of Patel's *Acts* is remarkable. It is, he explains in the Introduction, a faithful citizen's response, in the wake of the July 7, 2005, attacks in London, to “radical Muslims...spread[ing] their message of proper Muslim behavior plus hatred for the West.” The book's hook, a key problem it addresses, is the assumed scourge of radicalization among the “second generation of immigrant Muslims in the West.” It stems, Patel explains, from their “experience of ‘two-ness’”—because of “the deep burn of racism,” they, as Muslims, do not feel at home in such places as the United States or United Kingdom. And that is where, “at the crossroads of our identity crisis,” they “too often meet Muslim extremists” who instruct them “to become death and kill.”<sup>26</sup> At the core of the book is religion as identity, one category meeting another. The solution to the “two-ness” and “death and kill,” Patel argues, is to realize that Muslim and other religious identities are being excluded

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<sup>22</sup> Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal,” 72–73.

<sup>23</sup> Simpson, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Simpson, 74.

<sup>25</sup> William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>26</sup> Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 13.

from public discussions and social services.<sup>27</sup> Once such identities are included and properly addressed, the problems of racism and extremism, Patel suggests, would begin to dissipate.<sup>28</sup>

One problem here—as Charles Kurzman demonstrates in *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists*—is that Patel’s assumption about the widespread radicalization among young Muslims in the U.S. and Western Europe, the premise of his *Acts* and “struggle for the soul of a generation,” is statistically wrong.<sup>29</sup> Ali’s book confirms Kurzman’s study. And it cuts through Patel’s assertion of young American Muslims’ “two-ness:”

As this analysis suggests, the offspring of immigrants or converts are aware of their difference and the multiple demands (family, faith, peers) made on them. They recognize that others in their generations who do not share their faith or family background also have challenging experiences in which they try to balance the expectations of others with the persons they want or hope to be. They acknowledge that the process is harder for them, but they learn to navigate it and construct a sense of self that incorporates all the different “parts” of themselves, as Aisha put it. They do not see these parts as mutually exclusive.<sup>30</sup>

What informs the dramatic dissonance between Patel and Ali’s observations? *Acts of Faith* is a manifesto, an advocacy for a vision of a pluralistic America that incorporates a quilt of religious identities. That is its key note, its central preoccupation. Everything else—including the binary power play of “good Muslim, bad Muslim”—serves this purpose.<sup>31</sup> It translates into broad strokes that rely on assumptions, repetitions of popular, often policy-driven, discourses of the first decade in the War on Terror.<sup>32</sup> Ali’s counterpoint, in contrast, is a result of a multi-year formal research in multiple sites across the U.S., backed by “more than a decade” of working, studying, lecturing, organizing, mentoring and volunteering “in the Muslim community.”<sup>33</sup> Ali’s discipline of interweaving her academic work with community service has honed her senses; it enables her to hear multiple, coexisting and often contradictory, notes in her conversations with American Muslims. It allows her to sense and interpret, for example, when “the jokes about the FBI using my research findings were, in fact, not just jokes.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Ali is able to engage with and respect her conversation partners’ “calculus of ethnography.”

One can hear a resonance between Ali and Simpson’s careful approaches. They entail building and deepening relations, and hearing narratives and letting go of “prepared list[s] of questions,” as Ali explains it.<sup>35</sup> Ali and Simpson, in other words, respect the interpretive sovereignty of their interlocutors. Did you notice how Ali quotes Aisha, one of her young

<sup>27</sup> Patel, 48.

<sup>28</sup> The framing of interfaith work—and now, perhaps, interreligious studies—as a key to unlocking America’s promise, an answer to yet another problem animating a political or media cycle, is not unique to Patel’s *Acts of Faith*. See, for instance, Bruce Lawrence’s critique of Diana Eck’s *On Common Ground* in Bruce B. Lawrence, *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Muna Ali, *Young Muslim America: Faith, Community and Belonging* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 90.

<sup>31</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism,” *American Anthropologist*, 104, no. 3 (2002): 766–75.

<sup>32</sup> Ali, *Young Muslim America*, 49–54.

<sup>33</sup> Ali, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Ali, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ali, 10.



conversation partners, as an authority on the complex dynamics of her own realities? Ali and Simpson do not cover human beings with blankets of generalizations; they do not, as Simpson expresses it, add to “the literature written upon them.”<sup>36</sup> Simpson describes it as a discipline of moving away from difference “as a unit of analysis.” It is a practice of engaging people through their contrapuntal narratives, rather than representatives of some imaginary categories of “culture” or “religion.”

The irony is that—through all the set-ups of what Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, following Soo Ah Kwon, calls “nonprofitization of activism”—much of the on-the-ground work Patel’s tireless advocacy sustains is more nuanced than the framing of his *Acts* suggests.<sup>37</sup> From conversations with people who participated in the Interfaith Youth Core’s engagements, I know that it is transformative—on the level of micropolitics, not broad strokes. (It is too bad that the book promoting this work reads like a soft-power arrow in the quiver of the War on Terror, and feeds into the dynamics that racialize Muslims in the U.S. and other colonized terrains.) Another ironic note is that Ali and Simpson, a sociocultural anthropologist and a political anthropologist, scholars unaffiliated with interreligious studies, provide more sound interpretations of human relations than this field’s pioneer, at least in that one book. The difference, I think, is due to Ali and Simpson’s discipline of contrapuntal engagement, where respect is a precondition. I do not suggest that this example is somehow representative of interreligious studies as a whole. Generalizations and other mappings are wrong. But it allows me to sharpen my question: Why interreligious studies? What is promising about it?

In the spirit of Said’s opening note, contrapuntally, my hunch is that it has to do with an emphasis on *-religious*. Not as a “horizontal” adjective, designating an arrangement of flat identities, enclosures and administrative units.<sup>38</sup> Not the kind of “religious” that is stapled to the categorical (computing, boundary-drawing, wall-enclosing) noun.<sup>39</sup> But the humble, lower case *-religious*, with the hyphen motioning to its possible relations among other “flowing currents,” requiring “no reconciling, no harmonizing... ‘off’ and may be out of place, but... always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward... without one central theme.”<sup>40</sup>

What matters here, as a matter of discipline, is the contrapuntal motion and attention to it, which must refuse the instinct of using *religious* to blanket over other human beings and realities. “*-religious*” in the sense I stress, is, to use Connolly’s word, “agonistic”—the way he uses it, with a simultaneous emphasis on relations, with respect as a precondition.<sup>41</sup> (In [the *Georgetown Companion*], for instance, one can hear an echo of this *-religious* in Francis X. Clooney’s “interreligiously.”<sup>42</sup>) Without this sense of *-religious*, the *inter-* in *interreligious studies* is flat: it is just

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<sup>36</sup> Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal,” 68.

<sup>37</sup> Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 197 and Soo Ah Kwon, *Uncivil Youth: Race, Activism, and Affirmative Governmentality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 157.

<sup>39</sup> Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage), 295.

<sup>41</sup> Connolly, *Pluralism*, 125.

<sup>42</sup> Francis X. Clooney, “Teaching and Learning Interreligiously in a Time of Change: Beginning (but Not Ending) with Primary Texts,” in *The Georgetown Companion*, 281-290.

another line in a landscape of binaries—part of what Charles Taylor calls “the dark side of our modern Western social imaginary,” with its “connections to our sense of civilized superiority and its possible relation to the persecution of scapegoats.”<sup>43</sup>

## RY

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 182–83.